

The Valley Girl

By
ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE leaves his little cabin in the woods of the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey and starts out on his day's work. He realizes that he has left his trunk unlocked. Going back to lock it he finds an escaped convict in his cabin.

The convict attacks him, and his life is saved by Heather, Faith Christie's collie dog. Gavin lets the convict go and after thanking Faith he tells her about his work. Under Wilgus Bett Gavin is drawing up secret plans for a land development project for the valley to save it from being condemned and used for water power. Gavin's own family home in the Catskills had been demolished to make way for water power and he feels very strongly on the subject.

Faith then tells him that she and her brother, Jeff, are also planning a land project which makes them business enemies of Gavin's, much to Faith's regret. Gavin wonders if they couldn't work together.

Faith also tells him that she has met Wilgus Bett and doesn't trust him.

After Faith leaves, Gavin sees the underbrush moving in the woods as if someone were coming through. His only thought is that it must be the convict returning instead of making good his chance for freedom. Somewhat alarmed at the thought Gavin stands gazing at the moving leaves.

FOR only an instant Gavin stood at gaze. Then a wholesome gust of anger swept him. He had fought this man. He had been saved from him, right humiliatingly, by a girl and a dog. He had given the fellow his freedom when he might have haled him to prison.

And now the thief was coming back to try conclusions with him again.

Very good. The intruder should not have to come the whole way. Of all the many wise and unwise rules for street fighting, the best is:

"Carry the fight to your opponent. Hit first and keep on hitting."

Wherefore, instead of awaiting his foe, Gavin Cole strode truculently toward the curtain of high undergrowth through which the tossing swath of leaves marked the other's approach. He would not wait out here in the open, but would charge the forest adversary who was stalking him.

Across the bit of dooryard clearing Cole ran, gathering himself for a dive into the wall of leafage.

At the green verge he stopped with an abruptness that all but sent him toppling. The bushes had parted directly in front of him. A man stood there, smiling amusedly down at the bellicose engineer.

"Hello!" hailed the newcomer, with breezy good nature. "Is that the way you welcome your guests? You look as if you were aching to pitch into me. What's all the ferocity for?"

Wilgus Bett loomed gigantic against the verdant background. The warmth of the morning and the strenuous way

through mountain undergrowth had brought perspiration to his wide white forehead, but had in no detail marred the faultless grooming that was his. The smile he turned on the dumfounded Gavin was boyishly infectious.

"I had to run up to High Point last night to see Stanton," he went on, "so I thought I'd stroll across country—I mean across mountains—and look in on you before I go back to civilization. It was only eleven miles, but, Lord, what going! I must be getting old. It took me the best part of three hours."

He laughed, shaking his mighty frame as if to reassure its flawless muscles that age was not really stiffening them.

"I was afraid you might have started out for the day," he went on. "But—why, boy, what have you been doing to the side of your head? Yellow jacket sting you?"

"Yes," replied Cole. "Just that. I had a visitor. A yellow jacket, but with faded stripes. He detained me. I sent him off up the mountain. I saw someone coming back, and I thought he was looking for another breather."

In a handful of words he told of his encounter. The big man nodded approval.

"Good stuff!" he commented. "The faithful hound and the heroine and all. Everything complete. Up to date too. In the old times it used to be the gallant young hero who rescued the damsel in distress. But that's just one of the million things that are upside down nowadays. But—with sharp abating of his breeziness—"you say you found him rummaging your trunk. I hope that isn't where you keep your blue prints and your reports and all that sort of thing."

"Certainly it is, Mr. Bett," answered Cole, thrown on the defensive by his employer's tone and feeling ridiculously like a chidden schoolboy. "Where else would I keep them? They're as safe as they'd be in a church. They—"

"Church poorboxes have been robbed before now," said Bett. "In fact, it's quite a popular indoor sport, I'm told, with penny crooks who are short on

pluck and imagination. As to the trunk being 'safe,' I notice you say this jailbird had it open and was going through it."

"I TOLD you I left it unlocked this morning and that I was on my way back to lock it," returned Cole. "Not once in twenty thousand times would any thief bother to come here. I'm supposed to be a crack-brained and half-sick artist. The mountaineers look on me as a freak. They don't think I have anything worth looting. Even if one of them should smash open my trunk, the blue prints and the other things wouldn't mean anything to him. It—"

"No?" Bett caught him up. "Maybe not. But the mountaineers aren't the only people in the world. They aren't the only people in this valley who would be plenty much interested to go over the work you've been doing. That's what I came here to talk about this morning. One of the things."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all—say, boy, I don't mean to rile you, and I know you're all to the good, but this is too important to handle with gloves."

"First of all, have you said a word to anybody—to anybody—about this work of yours? I'll tell you why I'm asking. I—"

"Yes," said Cole, evenly, "I have."

Wilgus Bett whirled about on him with a speed that seemed impossible in so big a man. His blond face was distorted and fire-red.

"What?" he roared.

"Half an hour ago," proceeded Gavin, far more at ease under this bombardment than he had been under Bett's cooler manner. "I told Miss Christie."

"You—you told the Christie girl?"

"I said I told Miss Christie," answered Cole, unruffled. "Not 'the Chris-

Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT



"Here, son. Take a look at this. It always tickles me heaps when I can turn one of the enemy's guns to my own use"



Gavin sees that it has to be war, and an uncommonly nasty war at that. His mingled feelings of trust and distrust and awakening love torment him



Jeff Christie's lean face was set hard. "Please go into the house," he said. "I have something to say to Cole"

tie girl.' I told her this morning that we—"

"Told her!" groaned Bett, in comic misery. "Out of a hundred—and—twelve million people in this occasionally free country, you had to pick out one of the only two who oughtn't to be told. She is one. Jeff Christie is the other. By this time they both know!"

"If they do," argued Cole, "what harm is done? They—"

"What harm isn't done?"

"No harm is done. You told me to say nothing until all the surveys were made and all the key sites picked out and a start made on the option. That is all done. You said as soon as the option hunt began everyone would know anyhow. The option hunt is on. And I wrote you of the options I've already got when I asked you to send out the blanks to me. What harm is done? If one person in the Reginskill or in Preakness County knew it, it was bound to get to the Christies in a day or two at the most. I haven't blabbed. I kept my mouth shut till the time when you said there wouldn't be any more need for secrecy."

A little to his surprise, the giant had lost the red fury of aspect, and the huge muscles tensed themselves no longer. The flurry of Jovelike rage had ebbed. Once more Wilgus Bett was his breezily suave self.

"I'm sorry I got mad, boy," said Bett soothingly. "I have a lot to bother me. And this was something I happen to be especially sore about just now. You say you never spoke of it to the—to Faith Christie—till today? You're sure?"

"I don't say I've done things without being sure," replied Cole stiffly. "I haven't mentioned it to her or anyone else till now. She told me she and her brother—"

"There has been a leak," explained Bett. "A big one. I found out about it two days ago, but I couldn't locate it. Naturally it never occurred to me to suspect you had been talking. You'd have been the last man on earth I'd have thought would betray me. That's why it jarred me so, just now, when you owned up. But since you didn't tell her or anyone about it till just today, then the leak must come from someone else. I don't know who. But I sure aim to find out. I pay well. And I pay for close mouths."

He was silent for a moment, his steel-blue eyes broodingly on the valley below, his shapely boot toe scuffing the dooryard earth.

"No," he said at last, "you didn't make any break by telling. You're right in saying I told you there wouldn't be any need for quiet after the option hunt was on. But someone knew about it long enough to start bidding against us for a lot of things. That means bigger prices to pay and a peck of annoyance all around. The story got out, it seems, weeks ago, from all I can hear."

HIS frown broke up into a wondrously infectious grin.

"Leak and counterleak!" he philosophized. "They have got to some of our crowd. But I've got deeper into some of theirs. I paid well for it, but it was worth the price. Christie hasn't a Chinaman's chance, now that I know my game. He—"

"That's what his sister and I were talking about this morning," interposed Gavin. "She told me his scheme. It looked to me like a good one."

"A good one!" echoed Bett. "You say that? You of all people! This hermit life must have given you change of heart."

"No," denied Cole. "I mean it. This

land-development idea of his, and his plan to open the valley wide to commerce and to homes—they're good. And they're good for us too. Your syndicate can't possibly buy up the whole eight-by-twelve-mile Reginskill Valley. All you can do is to get hold of the best sites and develop them. There's enough land for both you and the Christies to operate. His chain of lakes and the new railroad will mean as much for you people as it will for him. Isn't there some way of your getting to-

gether and working the whole thing in partnership? There's more than enough for both syndicates to handle, if they work together. It's better than clashing over every—"

"Boy!" broke in Wilgus Bett, in blank-faced astonishment. "What in blue and saffron blazes are you blithering about? Add up your thoughts, can't you, and put it plain? What crazy rot are you talking? Suppose you go back to the beginning and tell me just what it was she said her brother is aiming to do."

Concisely Gavin repeated Faith Christie's outline of the plan for the valley's development and occupation. Bett heard him through, that blankly incredulous stare still keeping his keen face foolish. Then, with a shout of Homeric laughter, the giant slapped his engineer on the back.

"You poor Babe in the Wood!" he guffawed. "It's lucky no gold-brick man found you here in the wilderness. He'd have cleaned you out. You'd be a fortune to any oil-well seller." He broke into new spasms of mirth.

"I don't get you," said Cole, highly offended. "Perhaps when you're quite through doing your matchless imitation of the Laughing hyena you'll let me in on the joke. I could stand having a good laugh just now. If—"

"Cool down, boy," adjured Bett, strangling back his own merriment at sight of his employee's irritation. "I'll make it plain to you in words of one syllable if you'll be patient. Then you'll see, maybe, why it hit me as funny."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said Gavin icily. "Suppose you begin."

"Then I'll begin with the counterleak I said I had started in the Christie outfit," assented Bett. "The burden of the leak was this: The Seaboard City Water Company is paying Jeff Christie

more money than ever Jeff saw or heard of before in his life. They're paying him to work quietly here in his own bailiwick, to buy up every important site he can lay hands on along the Reginskill. Likewise he's earning his money."

"To buy up—"

"The Seaboard City people have had their eye on this grand watershed for three years," continued Bett. "They couldn't get a look-in. Christie combined a bunch of the old-timers against them and snowed them under with injunctions and suchlike hurdles. The Seaboard crowd couldn't buy the valley. So, very sensibly, they bought Christie."

"No! He—"

"The natives trust Jeff, you know," proceeded Bett, not heeding the interruption. "So when he gives it out that he is getting options on land for lake sites and for railroad right of way and for commuter towns and all that, why, they swallow it whole. They're crazy to make their valley boom. So they are ready to give their dear fellow citizen options on everything and anything. He's grabbing up these options with both hands. Only—he's grabbing them for the Seaboard City Water Company, not for the dinky Utopia he is gabbling about and that he has sicked his sister on to confiding to you. He's heard of our scheme, through the leak I told you about. So he sends her up there to feed you a yarn that'll throw you off the track. They've played you for a sucker all right, boy. Now do you wonder it hit me as being funny? To think of you listening with your mouth open to—"

GAVIN COLE walked abruptly away. To the edge of the clearing he walked. There he stared with unseeing eyes down into the Reginskill Valley. His heart was sick within him. He yearned to yell "You lie!" at this suavely amused giant and to smash his fist into Bett's mirthful face.

Yet underneath his impotent fury and self-contempt lurked the miserable certainty that Wilgus Bett had told him the truth. Men of the financier's shrewd type do not pay large sums to learn mere lies or rumors from the enemy's camp. If Bett had paid for this information, then undoubtedly he had verified every word of it.

Into Cole's sick memory came a tanned little face with level brown eyes alight with almost fanatical enthusiasm. This girl was no liar, no clever actress, to fool him with an elaborate tale which held no truth. Logic or no logic, he could swear to himself she was clean and white.

He did not know how he knew she was so. But know it he did, beyond all mental quibble.

Mastering himself, he turned back toward his employer.

Bett had moved across the clearing and stood close behind him. The laughter was gone from the giant's face and voice. Gently, almost caressingly, he spoke.

"Boy," he said, "I owe you a big apology. I've been thinking it over. I owe an apology to Faith Christie too. I don't know her very well. But I do know human nature a bit. She isn't the cheap kind to come up here with a flossy lie just to boost her brother's game and to make a fool of you. It's thirty to nothing that Jeff made her believe the yarn she sprung on you. Come to think of it, the only times I ever met her she was all het up with enthusiasm about this wonderful valley of hers. She wouldn't be likely to cheer herself hoarse over any trick to drown it out. No. Jeff has conned her into thinking his water deal is a gigantic land boost. It's so dead easy to make a woman believe anything—so long as

the thing doesn't happen to be true! Buck up, boy! Quit grouching. Nobody's blaming you."

Nettled at his own glumness and once more feeling oddly babyish and crude in the presence of the big man, Gavin shrugged his shoulders and essayed a grin. The effort was more conscientious than brilliant.

"Buck up!" exhorted the giant once more. "If Christie can fool the whole region, including his own clever sister, you needn't be ashamed of his story's fooling you. The main thing is that you know them in time. It's going to make our own work a lot stiffer. But I'll win out. It's a way I've got. Keep remembering that."

"I'm sorry I acted like a silly kid," said Cole. "But I suppose I'm not quite normal on this subject. And it made me sick, just for a minute, to think of Jeff Christie selling the soul of his birthplace for what he can squeeze out of the water crowd. He seemed to be a mighty decent chap. Well, if it means harder work, it means work that I can put both my shoulders into."

"That's the talk!" applauded Wilgus Bett, smiting him once more between the shoulders in agonizingly hail-fellow fashion. "Get your teeth into it. We're going to win out, I tell you. And we'll block one more of God's green valleys from the Water Devil. How's that for high-grade rhetoric? . . . Get me your big map, will you?"

INFECTED by his overlord's magnetic optimism and with his own brief disillusionment turned to hot fighting spirit, Gavin Cole went to the cabin and brought forth a much-folded linen chart he had sketched of the region.

Bett spread it on the ground, pegging its corners with stones. Then on hands and knees he bent over it, his strong forefinger tracing imaginary routes thereon. Once or twice Bett upreared his vast bulk to enable him to peer out over the valley at his feet.

At last he nodded his head in self-approval and called to the puzzled Cole:

"Here, son. Take a look at this. I got an idea from that thing Faith Christie told you—the lie her brother sprung on her about what he was going to do with the valley. It always tickles me a heap when I can turn one of the enemy's guns to my own use. Here's where I can do it."

With a pencil stub he was drawing quick and sure lines on the carefully executed linen map.

"Remember what she said about that chain of lakes her brother was planning?" he explained. "Well, that's not a bad idea. It's a corking idea if it won't cost too much. And it won't. There's a big lure to campers and bungalofers and picnickers and country-housers in a pretty lake. They take to water like a duck or a hydropath. You can sell them land near a lake or a river for three times what they'll pay for better land that's anywhere else. The valley has a first-rate river splitting it. But how about a lake? Not a string of measly sample-size lakelets, but a he-lake a mile or so wide and a couple of miles long? Right here?"

He indicated the lines he had sketched.

"See," said he, "run a thirty-foot dam across here—not more than four hundred feet wide either, at the most—and you back up the stream into a lake that will run back for nearly two miles. A mile wide too at the broadest—that is, if your gradients on this map are right. The land slopes down to it, just right, from behind. Those two knolls will make picturesque islands in it too. We can sell each of them piecemeal or else to one buyer. There's a big real-estate lure to islands. I don't know

why. But people feel important in owning one."

Gavin Cole was studying the sketch. Instantly he saw the value of Bett's suggestion, and he gave tribute to the swift thinking that had evolved it.

"Good!" he exclaimed in eager enthusiasm. "And, look, more than half of the area is covered by our options. That includes the site for the dam too."

"Yes," observed Bett dryly. "So I noticed. Isn't it lucky I told you to start getting your options at the lower end of the Reginskill instead of the upper? It was a hunch of mine, I suppose, and—"

"H'm!" muttered Gavin, busily conning the map. "Kills another bird with the same stone too! Look there. If our dam was to be about five times as high as the thirty feet you're planning, do you see what it would do? It would flood pretty near the whole valley, for about ten miles back. That's what the water crowd must have had its eye on.

by tomorrow or next day. Just throw yourself, till then, into getting any options you can, at any sort of a sane price, for flowage rights on the rest of the ground we'll need for it. The day we get enough of them I'll start a gang to work on the dam's core wall. Good-by. And—I don't need to tell you Jeff Christie will be making war medicine for us from now on. Stay awake."

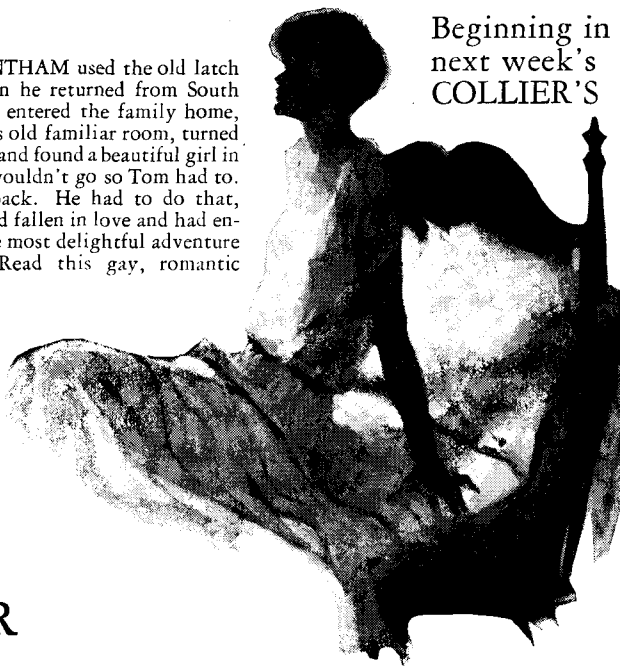
THE big man was gone, seeming to take with him much of the morning's breeziness and ozone. But behind him he left, as ever, a feeling of buoyancy in his employee, a sense of eager loyalty and of ability to work miracles under the leadership of such a general.

Then, as Gavin Cole stood studying the map, with its penciled additions, before folding it and returning it to the trunk, he was aware of a sudden lessening of his enthusiasm in his chief's new move and even in that magnetic chief himself.

Welcome Home

TOM BENTHAM used the old latch key when he returned from South America, entered the family home, went up to his old familiar room, turned on the light—and found a beautiful girl in his bed. She wouldn't go so Tom had to. But he came back. He had to do that, too, for he had fallen in love and had entered upon the most delightful adventure of his life. Read this gay, romantic comedy

By
**ALICE
DUER
MILLER**



Beginning in
next week's
COLLIER'S

That's the one ideal key site for them. If they could get hold of it, their battle would be three quarters won. If they could build their dam there and get enough options to justify them in starting their condemnation game—"

"Yes," again said Bett, "queerly enough, I thought of that too. That's why I had you begin your option hunt down there. By the way, speaking of options—"

He drew from his capacious inner coat pocket a thick sheaf of printed forms.

"HERE you are," he said. "They came from the printer's yesterday, just as I was starting for High Point. That's why I brought them along instead of mailing them. Better start in right away to fill some in and change them from the scribbled options already got. There's a mysterious kick in a printed form that a written agreement lacks. It will impress these back-country men more to have it in print. I'll get things started right away on that lake idea. How'd you like us to call it Lake Gavin? No, that'd be a punk name as a seller. We'll call it something like Paradise Mirror or Worldcrest Mere. When Shakespeare said there isn't anything in a name he just proved how little he knew about selling suburban real estate.

"Good-by, boy. You'll get full directions about going ahead on our lake

Illogically, between him and the penciled lake, he saw a willfully determined little bronzed face. Through the mountain silences he could have sworn he heard a young voice, with a thread of stark urgency in it, insisting to him, over again:

"Too good to be true, he's always seemed to me. I didn't like him, that's all. I don't believe in him."

Scoffing at Faith's distrust of his financial idol, Cole strove to put the memory of her words and face out of his mind. They would not be expelled. For perhaps ten minutes Gavin stood there scowling at the map. Then his eyes turned to the valley mouth, where the dam was to be built for the ornamental lake.

Of a sudden he swore, softly, fluently. His mind was made up. With the air of a man who acts consciously against his saner judgment, he laid aside his knapsack and sketch pad, slipped into cleaner raiment, and set forth a second time from his shack.

But this time he did not head for the mountains and the upper valley. Instead he strode down the steep trail toward the byroad which led to the busy little back-country town of Regin.

Once only did he stop on his townward hike. That was to take an envelope from his pocket and scrawl a handful of words on its back. He read over what he had written, cut out three

or four words, changed two others, and resumed his way to Regin. He walked fast, as though to reach his destination before his mind could change as to his purpose there.

Yet he was not to get to his chosen goal without an adventure which at the time seemed petty enough.

As he was passing the Regin post office, on his way to the two-story business block beyond, a dog bounded from the post-office steps and came frisking up to him. It was Faith Christie's collie, Heather.

As Cole stooped to pat the dog Faith herself came out of the little hardware shop which occupied half the single-story post-office building. In her hand dangled an old and stained and broken collie collar.

"Don't make friends with him, Mr. Cole," she adjured. "He's in disgrace. He's just been scolded. He knows he's been bad. That's why he is so effusive with you. He's glad to find somebody who doesn't know yet how naughty he has been. Yes, I'm talking about you, Heather," she ended as the collie looked up at her with whimsical ruefulness.

"Has he eaten the mayor's cat," asked Cole, "or only given someone hydrophobia?"

"The first guess was nearer right," she told him. "We were passing here on our way home from Woollet, and he saw a cat crossing the road. He's been trained never to move away from my side when we're going through a town or along a busy road. More dogs get killed by cars that way than any other. But he saw the cat, and he went for her. He dashed right in front of a motorcycle and he grazed a truck. It was a miracle he didn't get run over."

"Did he get the cat?"

"Of course he didn't. She ran up that tree over there. He was barking so loudly he couldn't hear me call him. And a woman who said the cat belonged to her was threatening to have him shot as incurably vicious. I ran across and caught him by the collar to pull him away from the tree. He was jumping up on the trunk and behaving like a crazy puppy. He happened to jump just as I caught hold of him. The collar is ever so old and decayed, as you can see. It broke.

"So I left him on guard, on the steps here, while I went into the shop to get him another collar," she continued. "But of course they have nothing in stock that's within two inches of being large enough for his absurdly furry neck. So what am I to do?"

OUT of several billion alternatives," suggested Cole, "why don't you let him go as he is till you get him home? There's no law, is there, against dogs appearing on the one street of Regin insufficiently clad? Or is there?"

"That's precisely what there is," she declared. "That's what's worrying me. Regin is in the middle of one of its periodical stray-dog reforms. There's a fine of \$10 for every dog found at large in Regin Township without a collar and license tag. Don't you see, I'll have to parade him up the street, past the traffic policeman and past the office of the justice of peace, brandishing his collar and license tag and, trusting the majesty of the law will accept that as a substitute for obeying the ordinance. If the policeman happens to be feeling unusually judicial, he may give me a summons. He's that kind of a policeman. He always follows the rule that it's better to give than to receive. His summonses are dispensed with a real Monte Cristo wastefulness. He—"

"Hold on," interposed Gavin, "I think we can find a way to foil the summons fancier. How about this?"

He took out (Continued on page 32)

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a silk handkerchief, large and white and new, which chanced to be the only form of kerchief he had been able to lay hands on when he dressed so hurriedly for his town trip.

In one corner his initials, "G. C.," were worked vividly in blue. It was a flashy handkerchief at best, one of a half dozen sent him on his recent birthday by an elderly relative whose tastes were garish. The flaring initials had been embroidered by the giver, and they showed more zeal than taste.

Deftly Cole twisted the silk into a long roll. This he tied about Heather's massive throat.

"So!" he announced, standing off to view with pride his work as a collar-maker. "Now let me have the license tag."

"You're not going to spoil that pretty handkerchief by tying it around Heather's neck!" objected Faith. "It's outrageous. It—"

"Possibly it is," he assented. "But it's the only one I have with me. And it's better than a summons. So—"

"You know I didn't mean the handkerchief was outrageous. You know perfectly well I didn't. I meant it's outrageous that you should spoil your silk handkerchief by twisting it that way and—"

"It's all done now," he said. "So if you'll let me have the license tag—"

Ignoring her continued protests, he took the dangling leather collar and detached from it the metal tag. This he knotted into one short loose end of the silk.

"There you are!" said he. "Even the Draconic laws of Regin don't say that a collar must be of any special material. Behold the reclad Heather, resplendent in summons-proof silk! If the cop questions you, tell him the initials G. C. stand for Good Collie."

"It's ever so good of you," she thanked him. "I'll send it back to you as soon as it can be washed. Heather has a collar at home, a new one he hasn't even worn."

ASTHEY strolled along through Regin and down the dusty byroad beyond it toward the Christie homestead Gavin Cole forgot for the moment the errand which had summoned him down to the town in such haste. He found himself strangely content to walk on with this girl who until a few hours ago had made scant impression on him.

They talked idly; or rather Faith talked while Cole alternately listened and brooded pityingly on the shock which must be hers when she should learn of her brother's betrayal of his valley.

He longed to give her some hint that might soften the suddenness of the inevitable blow. But he could not conjure up any means for doing it.

In his breast warmed a dull rancor against the man who could cause her such unhappiness. As if she half-divined that his thoughts were on Christie, the girl said presently:

"Jeff may be at home by the time we get there. He is due back from New York either this morning or this evening. It has been lonely without him these past three days. I wouldn't let you walk so far out of your way to come home with me, but I know how glad he'll be to see you again. It's long since I've known him to take such a liking

to anyone as he seems to have taken to you. You'll stay to lunch too, won't you? After a stretch of bachelor house-keeping, perhaps even a pick-up luncheon may taste good. You'll stay?"

"Indeed, I shall," Cole accepted gratefully. "I know only one way of cooking eggs so that they'll taste like anything, or ham or bacon either, for that matter. And those are the only things I do know how to cook. I've cooked them so often and eaten them so often that I'm growing to abhor them. Some day I'm going to take lessons in a new way of cooking them. But till I do you'll forgive me, won't you, if I angle shamelessly for invitations to meals? I—"

They were turning in at a gateway between two century-old box trees. In front of them, with rolling and shrub-flecked lawn on either side, a hundred feet of cracked brick walk led to a rambling old white wooden house with green shutters and an ancient cupola perched above its boxlike expanse.

and Gavin. Apparently he had seen them from indoors.

"Oh!" exclaimed Faith at sight of him. "Jeff must have caught the eight-something train. And I wasn't here to meet him or have anything ready for him. He hates not to be met. No wonder he looks so glum. I—hello, old man! I'm so sorry I'm late. I didn't expect you till noon at the very soonest. Honestly, I didn't, Jeff. Have a good time?"

JEFF CHRISTIE'S lean face was set hard. A dull red smirched each bronzed cheek bone. His eyes were surly as they traveled past his sister to the man beside her. Perfunctorily he returned Faith's kiss. Then he said to her, his voice muffled and precise:

"Please go into the house. I have something to say to Cole. Go in, please."

"You'll have plenty of time to talk to him without sending me away like

clenching. But, like his host, he fought for calm.

"You're mistaken," he answered, steadying his angry voice. "That is not all. You can't order me from your land as if I was a tramp or a stray mongrel without giving me any reason. I came here first on your own invitation. Now you'll tell me what I have done to forfeit the right to come here. Speak up."

"I have come back from New York. It was there I heard about you and what you are really after up here on the Reginskill. If that doesn't tell you why I don't want anything more to do with you than if you were a sick skunk, there's no sense in my wasting words on you. Clear out. And I'll give you this further warning—warning, mind you, not threat—for acquaintanceship's sake: other valley men are going to learn from me why you are up here. They won't all be as easy-going about it as I am. If you value keeping a whole skin—and perhaps keeping a life

inside it—you'll leave this region and leave it without too much delay. But that's your affair and not mine. All I want you to do is to keep away from me and mine. That same order goes for Wilgus Bett, the blackguard you're jackaling for. Now get out and get out quickly."

"I am not jackaling for any man," flared Cole. "I am working for Bett's syndicate, and I'm not on a job I'm ashamed of. For that matter, any job would smell sweeter than the

Judas work you're doing, Christie. Not that it's any business of mine. Only I know your game, and perhaps that game has taught you to coin jackal into a verb. Only hyena hits me as a better name for a man who's trying to get fat on the corpse of his own home place. I—"

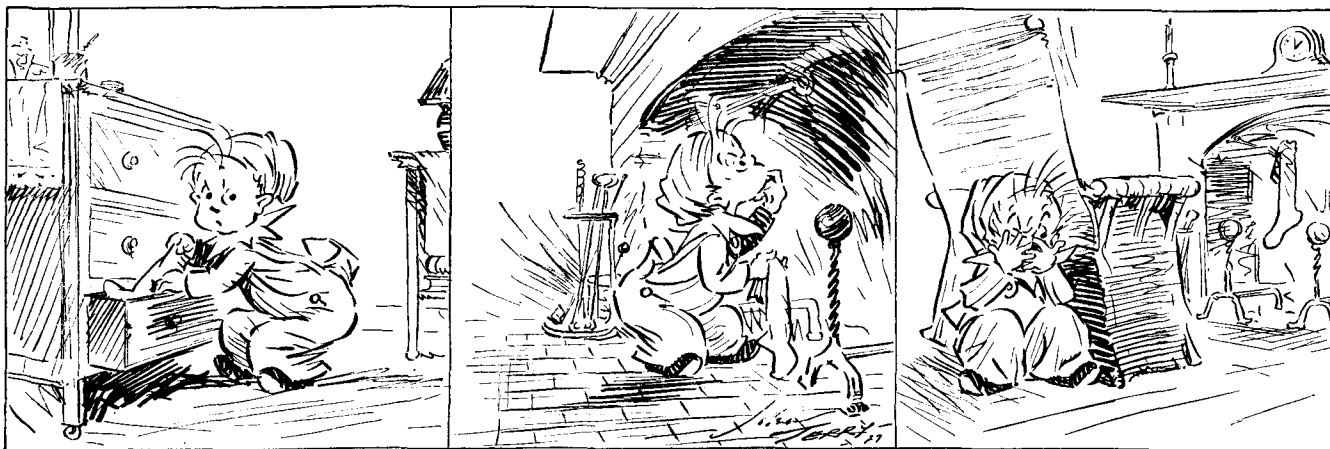
"I don't understand the gibberish you're talking," said Christie, "and I haven't any wish to. But I've told you three times to get off my land. I'm not going to soil my hands with you. But if you don't leave without any further words, my dog will run you off my grounds and all the way back to your own kennel. Heather—"

Gavin Cole threw back his head and laughed in genuine amusement.

"If I wait for Heather to drive me," he scoffed, "I'll stay undriven a long time. He and I are chums. Besides, he saved me from hurt this morning. And that means a lot more to a dog than if I'd saved him. Collies are disgustingly human, you know. But I'll go without making your dog disobey you. Remember, it's you who have declared war. It wasn't I. Not that it matters. Because it has got to be war, anyhow, I'm afraid, and an uncommonly nasty war at that. I'm sorry. But the valley is worth it."

HE WAS gone, without so much as looking back at the glowering Christie nor at the puzzled collie standing uncertainly at his master's side, nor even at an unhappy and amazed little face that watched him from the house.

"It's war," he muttered to himself again as he set his face toward the town and his forgotten errand there. "It's war, anyway it turns out. Sherman didn't know anything about war. He lived before water was anything worse than something to drink or wash in." (To be continued next week)



BERTIE—

Phlox and mountain pinks and larkspur and wallflowers rioted in raffish scorn of symmetry in veranda foot beds, between wistaria-twisted pillars. Behind the oak-starred lawn billowed down to the line of gnarled old willows which bordered the river.

Peace and sweetly tranquil age rested on the Christie homestead like a benison—an atmosphere which cannot be acquired by any ancient home in less than a couple of centuries and can be wrecked forever in a single year of splendid "Progress." Once destroyed, it is ended. So-called restoration embellishes it only to the same degree that a smear of rouge vivifies the nose of a corpse.

Wherefore, throughout the land, year by year, Progress annihilates, and Wealth, coupled with taste, seeks to restore. It is an amusing conflict and wholly typical.

As Faith and Cole passed into the grounds, between the sentinel box trees muskily sweet under the early spring sun, Heather pushed unceremoniously past them and tore along the brick walk at a breakneck gallop. Plumed tail waving, he pranced in circles around and around a man who had just come out on the porch.

The dog leaped high upon the man, seeking to lick his face, shattering the quiet air with his ecstatic barks of greeting, rubbing his dusty paws with a thousand lightning-swift pats against the human's dark town-going clothes.

Thus did Heather give characteristic collie welcome to the master he had not seen for some days: a welcome blended of genuine joyous adoration and with a racial sense for the sensationally dramatic.

Jeff Christie patted his dog absently, then ordered him to one side and descended the porch steps, walking hastily toward the approaching girl

a kindergarten kid. He's staying to lunch and—"

"You're mistaken," said her brother, in the same muffled voice. "He isn't."

"But—"

"Run on, please!" he bade her, harshness beginning to creep through the muffled quality of his tone. "I'll explain about it afterward. Hurry."

She looked from the frankly perplexed Cole to Jeff's lowering visage. Then, with half-laughing meekness, she obeyed. Sensing a scene, she went right reluctantly and full of curiosity. From childhood she had been submissive to the few commands of this elder brother of hers whom she idolized. Yet now she had come nearer to disobeying him than ever before.

Also she was conscious of an oddly maternal and wholly new desire to shield Cole from any possible explosion of Jeff's hard-held temper. The novel emotion perplexed her and baffled any effort of hers to explain it.

Christie said nothing as his sister made her way along the brick path toward the house. His brooding eyes followed her as she went until the front doors beneath the fanlight closed behind her.

Then slowly he faced Gavin Cole, the brooding eyes narrowing and focusing on the engineer's questioning face.

"Mr. Cole," said Christie, restraining his temper by visible effort, "what I want to say to you can be said very soon and very shortly. I want you to get off my land and keep off my land and drop my acquaintance and the acquaintance of my sister. I'll see to it that she drops yours. That's all. Now go."

The uncompromising words were spoken quietly and without vestige of heat. Yet the somber eyes were a smolder and the thin lips were working. Gavin Cole went brick-red; his fists

The Valley Girl

By ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE

*A sleepy valley is fraught
with dangers and strife*

*Illustrated by
HAROLD
VONSCHMIDT*



*Fight after fight
between the rival
syndicates' gangs
featured the
whole roaring
night of each pay
day*

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, and Wilgus Bett, his employer, are working on a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey, against Jeff Christie, who claims to be working out a similar plan but Bett says that Christie is working in the interests of a big water company.

Gavin's own childhood home in the Catskills was demolished in the interests of water and he feels very strongly on the subject.

There promises to be bitter war between the two camps even though Gavin is in love with Jeff's sister, Faith. Faith and her collie, Heather, had at one time saved Gavin's life when an escaped convict was attacking him. But now Jeff has forbidden Gavin to see his sister.

TWO things of note had happened in the Reginskill during the 217 years since the last Iroquois war party drove the Lanape from its surrounding hills and scalped, by way of good measure, nineteen of the valley's Dutch settlers.

The first of those happenings was when a battalion of Cornwallis' Hessians raided the valley from end to end, driving off cattle and looting silver spoons and featherbeds and burning farm ricks.

Then for nearly a century and a half the region slept cozily and fatly, with no livelier incident than the coming of the motor car and, latterly, the far-above droning flight of an airship.

Now, when the twentieth century was in full swing and in its third decade, the valley woke with wildly blinking eyes from its slumbers, to find its land values mysteriously soaring and a le-

gion of mad rumors rushing from end to end of it.

First young Jeff Christie had gone about among his neighbors offering fancy sums for options on tracts of boggy or stony meadow land and useless hillsides. Before the natives could grasp what he was about, another option buyer appeared, in the artist chap who had been camping for his health up on the side of Reginsberg.

Gavin Cole was offering and actually paying more for his options than was Christie. Also he had those options all nicely printed on regular forms, just like land deeds, and he was handing out actual cash for signatures.

Farmers who had been talked into giving options to Christie were sorry they had done so, because Cole was paying more. Then the Cole optioneers regretted they had been coaxed into signing on the dotted line of the printed forms, because Christie advanced his own prices.

COLE met the advance, and the contest went on merrily.

Farmers began to wax coy and to coquette with one and then the other of the bidders. Then Cole created a diversion. Hottest raged the fight around the land which would be covered by the Bett Syndicate mile-wide and two-mile-long lake.

At Bett's bidding Cole ceased to dabble with options for this key spot. He bought outright, paying prices which

for the most part.

Then came a squad of engineers and surveyors and the like, working under Gavin's command. Followed a horde of day laborers who swarmed and toiled and sweated and drank and fought and shoveled and blasted in a frantic effort to establish a core wall for the dam at the valley's bottle neck.

A flood of unprecedented wealth gushed into the valley. So did an unprecedented population. Regin and Woollet and lesser hamlets were choked by newcomers. Speak-easies sprang up overnight. Women swarmed in from nowhere like buzzards to a carcass.

And now Jeff Christie had a swarm of workers, following his own syndicate's invasion of engineers and surveyors. Fight after fight—single combats, multiple brawls—between the rival syndicates' gangs featured the whole roaring night of every pay day. Troughs seeped into the valley, drawn like the cheap women by the presence of many laborers and much loose-flung coin.

Hitherto the Reginskill country had been as safe ground as any on earth. Now, natives forbade their womenfolk to stir abroad alone after dark or to loiter unnecessarily on their shopping tours.

Men of the region took to carrying weapons when they must be on the roads or in the boom townlets by night.

The valley's entire police force, comprising nine men in all, resigned in a

body—this after they had been summoned by hurry call to Regin on a payday evening to squelch a brawl of two rival section gangs and had been beaten up themselves instead.

But presently appeared a platoon of armed and grimy businesslike men in khaki—detailed by Bett from a private police agency—who restored and maintained outward order.

MEANWHILE, every day and all day, work went on. In shifts the laborers were kept toiling at top speed from gray dawn until strings of glaring electric lights must illumine their sweating labors.

Speed—speed—SPEED! Speed was the watchword of the gang foremen, of the blaspheming division superintendents, of the engineer forces, of Gavin Cole. Cole passed on the word for speed, and scourgingly he enforced it on those who in turn enforced it all the way down the line.

Banner wages were paid, but banner work was demanded. Did a digger lay aside his pick to light his pipe, did a concrete mixer cross from his own machine to another to borrow a chew of tobacco, did a man scamp his task under crafty cover of energy—swift was the nearest foreman's eye and as swift was the same foreman's raucous dictum:

"Get your time and clear out!"

Even as Gavin drove his men, so Wilgus Bett drove him. Cole was in charge of the whole local field of operations now and was held responsible for everything done or undone. Nor was he allowed for an hour to forget his stark responsibility.

He was proud and not a little perplexed at his promotion from mere scout to commanding field officer. Yet he recognized therein his life chance, and he threw himself into the job with all his steel-spring vigor.

Bett was back and forth nowadays from New (Continued on page 26)

York almost every day, suave, cool, unruffled amid the seemingly methodless bedlam of turmoil; his quiet eye everywhere at once; his directions calm and ever to the point. Nothing escaped his notice. Nothing was too great or too small to center his attention.

Cole admired the giant tremendously. It was a privilege to work under such a leader. And Bett was well pleased with his subordinate. More than once he tossed Gavin a sentence of real approbation or praise for the tireless work he was doing and for the results he was getting.

No word had Gavin had from either of the Christies since the day, months ago, when he had been forbidden their home. A week later he had received a bulky envelope addressed in a woman's hand. It contained his blue-initialed silk handkerchief, washed and ironed.

Illogically, the man was hurt to the quick by the messageless missive. But already the pressure of overwork was beginning. There was no time for the luxury of personal grievances. Yet, to his annoyed astonishment, he found he was unable to put the girl from his mind. She had a way of appearing unbidden before his mental vision at inconvenient times, obtruding her personality between him and the task he was mulling over. He would interrupt himself in the futile occupation of reëncountering their scenes together on that day when she and Heather had intervened to save him from the convict's rush.

IN SLIGHT measure he sought to repay his debt to the collie. One Sunday morning Heather came strolling down Regin's only street on a sedate Sabbath walk. Three or four loafing laborers began to throw stones at him. Another resting worker essayed to catch the dog with a rope.

From the steps of the Eagle Hotel Cole shouted angrily to the men. Then he whistled to the bewildered collie. Gladly Heather trotted up to his well-liked friend. Turning to one of his aides, Cole said:

"Have word handed around the gangs that the first man who bothers this dog in any way is to be fired. Make it strong. It goes."

He went up to his room in the hotel where he was now living, chirping to Heather to follow him. The collie pattered willingly up the narrow flight after the man he liked. On Cole's bedroom table lay the remains of his combined Sunday breakfast and dinner, the central feature of the meal being a steak's T-bone whereto a quarter pound of meat still clung.

Gavin handed the luscious bone to the dog. Heather accepted it with grave appreciation and lay down on a rug to gnaw it in epicurean leisure. Cole sat at his desk and wrote:

Dear Miss Christie:

Heather is only a clean and high-minded dog so he doesn't know that the valley is no longer a safe roaming place for respectable citizens like himself. I have just had the good luck to rescue him from hazing and theft. Also I have just given word he is to be let alone.

But you would be wiser to make certain of his safety by keeping him at home when you or Christie is not with him. I think I can rely on throwing the fear of discharge into my own men, but I can't be responsible for the dog-stealing yearnings of the roustabouts in any of your brother's gangs. So you'd better keep him close till this pandemonium ends, if it ever does, and until the valley is civilized once more.

By the way, thanks for sending back my handkerchief. I'm sorry to have put you to so much bother about it. I am

still sorrier—a million times sorrier—that our friendship has all gone to smash. But that's one of the incurable things, I suppose, that it's no use to be sorry for. I wish it meant less to me.

He signed and addressed the note. Then, stooping, he tied it conspicuously to Heather's collar.

The collie looked up from his happy occupation of bone gnawing and thumped his plumed tail on the floor.

"Come on, old chap," said Gavin.

Out of the hotel and up the crowded street and into the still lovely open country walked Gavin, the collie frisking gayly alongside. When they had cleared the town and the groups of Sunday idlers and had come in sight of the square white Christie house's cupola, Cole halted.

Pointing to the distant house and touching with his other hand the letter that dangled from Heather's neck, he said, sharply:

"Home, Heather! Home. Find Mistress! Home!"

Twice in earlier days Faith had shown off her collie chum's accomplishments to Gavin by sending the dog thus

Thank you for sending Heather back to me. I am sorry to have troubled you.

That was all. With a snort, Gavin crumpled it and tossed it in his field-office wastebasket. Then, on his hands and knees and swearing at his own idiocy, he dumped out the fat basket's rag-bag contents and retrieved the wrinkled sheet of note paper, thrusting it guiltily into an inner pocket of his working coat.

THE speed and the worry of the early summer were occasioned by a really clever move devised by Christie or by his engineers.

The Reginskill meandered strongly through the valley, gaining size and momentum as it neared the bottle neck between ridge and mountain, where Bett's core wall and cofferdam were in progress. A mile above—and just to one side of the proposed limits of the Bett lake—was a line of dike-shaped ridges, perhaps the remnant of a prehistoric wall: perhaps a glacial relic. It cut the valley in a rough crescent from the Reginskill to the northerly hills.

The river flowed along the south

Gavin had cared little. According to his specifications, the Bett lake would not reach the top of the dike, on the latter's southerly side. There was no reason in spending a fortune on a tract of swampy land on the north which would cost thousands of dollars to drain.

He had acquired all the territory needed for the flooding of his mile-by-two-mile lake. The swamp was nonessential for the present at any rate.

But Christie or his engineers thought otherwise. Soon this became sickeningly apparent.

Someone in the Christie camp made the simple discovery that if you pour water into a cup you have a tiny lake. Also that the roughly semicircular dike, some twenty feet in average height, formed three sides of a cup perhaps half a mile in diameter, the northerly ridge being the cup's fourth side.

Thus, at hand and nature-made, was a half-mile-wide receptacle from five to twenty-odd feet deep, waiting to be turned into a lake. Nothing was left to make it a lake except to supply water to fill it.

Then came the equally simple solving of the filling problem. The Reginskill River, where it skirted the dike, was some feet above the level of the marsh. By cutting through a section of dike at its lowest part and at the river's deepest, the bulk of the stream could be sent sluicing down into the waiting marsh; thousands of gallons a minute.

The plan was complete when it was discovered that the flowage could be made perfect by damming a far end of the marsh, where the swamp extended narrowly beyond the end of the dike and on the hither side of the precipitous hill slope. Here was a site as ideal, in a smaller way, for a dam as was Bett's bottle-neck site, a mile away.

The overflow of the Christie lake could empty thus into the Raaten Creek, which flowed down from the hills to a gully below the point where dike and hillside so nearly met.

The whole thing was a proposition in engineering that even a novice could have conceived and almost carried out.

THROUGH one of the usual "leaks" Bett learned of the proposed Christie move. Instantly he saw what it must mean. Luridly he explained the predicament to Gavin Cole.

"What's to become of our lake," he demanded, "when they send the Reginskill swishing down into that damned marsh of theirs? Hey? Tell me that. They'll deflect the course, maybe, of the whole measly river. It's a cinch they'll deflect enough of it to leave us only a trickle. And how are we going to fill up two miles by a mile of spongy ground, forty or fifty feet deep in places, with just a trickle? Why, even when the whole Reginskill is in flood, it'll take it long enough to fill our lake. Part of that ground will absorb water quicker than your roustabouts lap up the speak-easies' rotgut booze. It'll take tons of water to the cubic yard to saturate it deep enough to make it stop absorbing. Well, when the Reginskill is sapped to a thread by that cut in the dike, how are we going to fill? We'd have to tear up all our literature about the limpid lake and ask the dear public to buy choice lots on Bett's Slough!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Gavin, dizzy at the hideous new complication.

"Oh, my lawyers are working the sad old injunction game, of course," answered Bett. "They're plastering him to the eyes with injunctions restraining him from cutting through the dike and letting the Reginskill into his marsh. Then, of course, we're sending an army of earnest experts down to Trenton, with check books, statute citations and all (Continued on page 34)



The next morning's mail brought him a two-line note

with a note to her brother or to one of the Christie servants. Heather understood. At the first iteration of the known words, "home" and "Mistress," he was off on his errand, proud as always to impress anyone with his own trick lore.

Gavin waited until he saw the dog swing into the grounds, between the thick old box trees at the gateway. Then, moodily, he turned back to his cheerless quarters at Regin.

The next morning's mail brought him a two-line note that read:

side of this dike, paralleling it for perhaps a hundred yards. To northward was a natural depression, from three to eight feet below the river's level and extending north for a half mile until it met the steep hill wall which enclosed one side of the valley.

Here, because Christie had been ahead of him, was a stretch of low and marshy ground on which Cole had not been able to gain an option. Part of it belonged to the Christies themselves, part of it to relatives who had been glad to sell it to Jeff rather than to a stranger.

The Valley Girl

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that, to plead with the legislature not to permit the shifting of the river's course. We've amassed some alluring legal facts about riparian rights too. No, boy, we're not quite asleep. But that's all the good it may do us."

"What do you mean? If—"

"The injunctions—dealt out the way our legal bunch will deal them—will keep him from cutting the dike for maybe a year. Maybe less. For a while. Meantime he can go straight ahead with his dam, down above Raaten Creek. Likewise he will. But in the long run he's liable to get the injunctions vacated, so my own law jugglers say. What we've got to do is to hustle, forty-one hours a day, to get our own dam up and the water into our lake. Then we'll have something tangible to go on. We can prove tangible injury then if he destroys our body of water by cutting a hole in the dike that holds it in. My lawyers say we can enjoin him permanently on that. But not while our own job is still up in the air."

"I see. Good."

"Good only if we can get our dam up and our water in before he can get his own piker dam finished and get enough of our injunctions vacated for him to smash a hole through the dike. That means RUSH for every one of us, boy. We can do our eating and sleeping after we've got our dam up and our lake in. Till then those are luxuries that must wait. See?"

"I SEE something else," volunteered Gavin. "Even if you have him sewed up for a while with hand-picked injunctions and legislation, dynamite is a tricky thing. Suppose one of his men should happen to be walking along the top of the dike some night at the spot where he'd like the escape cut to be. Suppose he should plant enough charges of dynamite in the dike to blow a hole thirty feet deep and thirty feet wide and let the whole Reginskill through the gap into his marsh? It would be hard to fix the legal blame on Christie. It would be harder to force him to repair a dynamite hole in his own land."

"When the time for danger comes, I'll have a double guard at that part of the dike, just this side of his boundary line," replied Bett. "I'll have a guard there day and night, with orders to shoot first and hand out repartee afterward. Thanks for the hint. But Jeff Christie won't be fool enough to let in the water, if he can help it, till his own dam is built and the marsh burnt over and detimbered. Not till his dam is done, anyhow. That's what we've got to look out for, boy. Ours has got to be done first. And ours is four times as big. Hustle!"

Thus had the hustling begun. Thus had the lower valley hamlets been turned into a cross between mine towns and slums.

The end was not in sight, nor even the climax.

Work on the rival dams waxed apace. With three times as many laborers and with ten times his opponent's wealth and resources, Bett forged ahead in the scrambling race for completion.

The bottle neck swarmed like an inverted ant hill. The foundation plans worked out by Gavin were discarded for others calling for foundations far deeper and stronger. Cole protested to his employer that this change would entail needless loss of time. Bett answered curtly and definitely:

"No loss of time. Only a gain of man power. I know what I'm doing. There'll be a bill to flash, for such a dam as I am building, that'll show any court on earth how criminal it'd be to let Christie rob me by draining my lake. I'm not piling on extra work just for the fun of going into debt. Stick to your own end of the job and don't waste time criticizing."

Ignorant of finance and of law, Cole bowed to the dictum of a man who had an invariable way of being right and went on with his multiplied labors.

Foremen, under lure of astonishing bonuses, worked their gangs almost to the point of mutiny. Worn-out and nerve-racked laborers, heavy with unaccustomed wages, eased their fatigue and temper in regal splendor of debauch during their scant spare time, and the valley's natives looked on with gasping horror at sights that were fantastically far outside the square and angle of their own quiet lives.

Herculean toil; Gargantuan debauch: this was the day and night routine of the ever-increasing rabble of workers. The police agency's force of guards was doubled, yet still had its capable hands more than full.

Gavin Cole, used though he was to

there's going to be the devil to pay and more ugly damage suits than I like to think about. Yes, the dives of all kinds are safety valves. I won't have them clogged. I'm running a big rush job here, not a workingmen's reform show."

"How about the good will of the valley people?" asked Gavin. "They've begun to hate us like poison, all of them. Their clergymen are preaching against the debauchery every Sunday. Their women and children don't dare go out alone. Somehow they hate our crowd worse than they hate Jeff Christie and his—partly because Christie is a native, I suppose, but partly because his men are kept in rather better control."

"That's because there are fewer of

incessant sojourns in the valley. With rooms fitted up as office and as bedroom, he spent most of his time at Regin and thence directed his cloud of lieutenants."

Cole left him there now and made his own way to the hotel's shabby porch. The day was Sunday. At this hour, during Gavin's first weeks in the valley, there would be a Sabbath hush over the drowsy townlet. Scattered groups of folk in their best clothes would be converging at the little old white church in the patch of green square above the business blocks. Families would be setting forth gayly in overcrowded and noisy cars for a day's picnicking.

More than once Gavin had come down on Sunday mornings from his hut to the ancient white church's services and to watch the placid Sabbath life of the valley after its week of hard toil on farm or in shop. There had been a wondrously restful Old World atmosphere to it all.

NOW, as he stood on the hotel porch and looked out on the street, he was struck painfully by the startling change in everything. The once shining clean Main Street was littered and foul. Two shopwindows had been broken the night before by pay-day carousers. The glass shards lay strewn on the dirty pavement.

Plenty of people were abroad, but all of them were foreign-faced laborers and their attendant toughs, together with a smattering of tawdry and tired-eyed women. The green in front of the church was worn brown by countless scuffing boots. Newspapers and broken bottles, and the like, spattered the once verdant space.

The church bell was not tolling its mellow summons across the Sabbath valley. But somewhere near by a honky-tonk piano was whanging out its meed of racketsy jazz. The scarce-muffled chug of machinery and the shouts of gang foremen told that the Sunday force was at work on the dam.

In assent to public opinion—an assent as unwilling as it was tactful—Bett had decreed that there should be no active work done there on Sundays. But he had said it might be necessary sometimes to keep a few men employed as an emergency force in order that the work of the week days should not be allowed to deteriorate.

The excuse was lame, but it was the only way whereby, covertly, he could maintain a full 30 per cent of his gross force frantically busy there on the day of rest without incurring even more unpopularity than already was his, as well as a protest from the labor unions.

Now the diminished Sunday shift was making known its presence, while the rest of the laborers loafed or amused themselves or slept off in their raw wooden barracks the effects of last night's pay-day debauch.

With a swelling distaste for the whole peace-shattering enterprise, Gavin set forth from the hotel for a half day's mountain tramping which should clear his brain and steady his eternally goaded nerves. Rarely could he steal time for such a hike. Yet ever, in his pitifully few leisure waking hours, this was the way he braced himself for the work and hustle and nerve twist that was to come.

He made his way along the choked street and out into the open country. By the time he had covered a mile or two he had left behind him most of the visible signs of the valley's invasion. Such laborers as Bett employed were not of the kind, usually, to waste their brief rest hours in country walks.

He left the road and strode across fields and woods toward the hills which shut in the valley to the north. Far behind him was Regin, and farther was the dam site whence a diminuendo hum of labor denoted Bett's successful evasion of rest-day regulations.

Just south of his line of march was

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"That's the third person I've seen go by in the last hour. I wonder if the elevators aren't running."

the crude recreations of labor gangs, was sickened. He complained to Bett of the indescribable state of affairs, begging him to authorize the closing of the speak-easies and the dives and the expulsion of the toughs of both sexes from the zone of dam operations. Bett laughed comfortably.

"Let 'em alone, boy," he bade the disgusted engineer. "Their foremen see to it that their spreeing doesn't interfere with their work power," continued Bett. "The man who is laid up, or even slowed up for an hour, by his last evening's fun gets fired. And the crowd knows it. Shut down the dives, and the whole crew of them will spread over the valley in every direction, hell bent for any mischief they can get into. The dives are a safety valve. If they can lose their cash in a crooked game, or if they can forget work by getting moderately drunk, or if they can get a jolly night at one of the dance halls, they go back to work with a punch; and they're content. If they can't, they're not content. And as soon as they're not content

them and because they're quartered in a camp two miles from the nearest village," said Bett. "Don't you worry about the valley people. The guards patrol their roads and keep the roustabouts pretty much concentrated. Our men do mighty little damage to the valley at large, considering how many of them there are and the kind they are. The valley will forget all about it or else remember it with a thrill and a grin. It won't set folks against our development. Why, look how the natives down at Haskell and Pompton and Midvale kicked about the munition workers' rowdiness during the war! Inside of a year after it stopped nobody remembered a thing about it. It'll be the same here. Don't you worry. We got to play the game with the cards we hold. The job's going grand."

FILLED with dumb nausea, Gavin Cole turned away from the fruitless conference with his overlord.

Bett had taken temporary quarters in the Eagle Hotel during his almost

The Valley Girl

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the curved dike which was to mark three of the four sides of Christie's projected lake. A hand bridge spanned the Reginskill here. Cole crossed it with the grim realization that now he was in enemy territory and subject perhaps to arrest for trespass.

At the hand bridge's northerly side he paused and looked down into the purling brown water that slid so turbulently over its bed of slimed stones and weedy gravel.

Always there was something half hypnotic to Gavin about fast-running water. Today, for a change, he could afford to think of this mountain-country river without estimating it in terms of flowage and average current force and of gallon volume per hundred yards.

The water swirled and braided, chucklingly, over incipient riffles. The long bottom weeds lay flat with the current like shocks of green-brown hair. Tiny fishes flashed silver in the yellow sandy backwaters, making timidly abortive dashes at the water spiders that sprawled over the surface. Cardinal flowers blazed on the water-scored low bank. Dragonflies darted busily above the water, bound apparently nowhere, yet flashingly eager to arrive at their nonexistent goal.

GAVIN started up from his half-smiling absorption in the sunlit river's busy life. There were clumping steps on the bridge behind him.

Three men, perhaps out on a Sunday stroll like himself, had come to the bridge on their way toward the distant labor camp where Christie's working force was bivouacked.

Cole nodded civilly to them as he moved aside from the end of the bridge to let them go by. The three acknowledged his nod with glowering faces. One of them ostentatiously spat on the ground.

Then they were gone, and gone too, for Cole, was the river's sweet glamour. Once more he was his workaday self.

He had recognized none of the trio. Yet very evidently all three men had recognized him. Presumably, to judge from their manner toward him and from their direction of travel, they belonged to the Christie camp.

If so, he could understand easily the antagonism they might feel toward the chief lieutenant of the rival enterprise—the man who had come hither as a scout and surveyor and option buyer and who now was supreme in command during Bett's frequent absences.

Need of labor had forced Christie to employ many of the toilers who had been discharged from the Bett forces for more or less trivial lapses of industry. Such discharged employees, naturally, had held Gavin indirectly responsible for their loss of a job, since it was to him that the foremen reported and from whom they received their orders, and they were certain to report him to their new fellows as a brute and a slave driver and several less flattering things.

Yes, the scowls of the three pedestrians were easy to account for. Yet, somehow, they irked Cole, and their memory marred his joy in his hike.

He took up his planned line of walk, toward the northerly hills. Twice before he had made his way thither during the past month. He was on a search—one of those whimsically interesting searches which add zeal to a mountain ramble.

A month earlier he had chanced to fall into talk with an old valley resident for whose son he had just found a job on the dam. The oldster had told him of a primitive zinc mine, high up on the southerly side of the tallest of these hills: a mine whose prospect shaft had been sunk a year before the American Revolution. The miner—a valley landowner—had made his Negro slaves sink the shaft in desultory fashion and at odd times, and they had struck at last a rich deposit of unusually good-grade zinc.

Then had come the Revolution, and the miner's death at the Battle of Princeton. His heirs had had scant interest in his discovery and had done nothing to improve on it. Finally the land had passed into other hands, and the story of the mine shaft had sunk into vague rumor.

But Cole's informant claimed to have blundered on the shaft years back during a hunting trip. His talk of the brush-hidden hole and of the probable fortune in zinc at its bottom had roused the professional zeal of the engineer. Perhaps the mine might prove worthless. On the other hand—especially when railroad transportation should be better—it might be worth a fortune. In any case, it was worth looking for.

On neither of his two other quests had Gavin been able to find trace of the shaft. Nor had he reason to think he would be luckier today. Yet it added an interest and a cogent reason of sorts to his walk.

There was less than a mile of low ground between the hand bridge and the bottom of the wooded hillside. The first quarter mile of this way led across a meadow. Then came a scarf of forest. As Cole resumed his walk he saw the three men ahead of him strike the field path which led toward this woodland. He followed.

As they reached the woods one of them looked back. Then all three moved on. When Gavin reached the woods he could see no trace of them except a smoking cigarette stub which lay in mid-trail a few rods inside the shade of the woods.

He thought no more of the matter, except that they had in all probability taken a path to the right which might be a short cut to their camp. He himself kept straight ahead until he reached the foot of the mountain.

Here the ground arose at an abrupt angle straight toward the summit. But a hundred yards to the right there was easier going. Here for some distance the ground sloped upward at an easy slant; in fact, a slant so easy that an impromptu spur track had been built transversely across it for the carrying of stone from a miniature new quarry in the lower hillside to Christie's dam.

Cole had seen this flimsy and rattle-trap half mile of unballasted makeshift railroad with its second-hand rails. He had grinned at its single gondola car, whose tiny engine hauled it, full of broken stone, and with all set brakes squeaking, down to the dam, or puffed groaningly upgrade with it again when the empty gondola returned to the quarry for another load. So steep was the grade that auxiliary brakes had been attached to supplement the regulation hand brakes.

ON ONE of his two Sunday hikes up this hillside Cole had come by accident upon the track and had followed it up to the quarry, where the gondola waited, full of stone, for the arrival of the engine on the next workday morning.

Incidentally, the bumpy track made an easier climb for Gavin, during the first part of his ascent, than did the shorter and steeper pitch straight in front. By following the rudimentary right of way to the quarry the worst pitch of the rise would be avoided.

Accordingly today he found the track and followed it once more on its twisting upward route. The engineer in him gave mingled credit and ridicule to the improvised railroad line as he plodded through its cuts and rounded its banked turns. Everything apparently, except a moderate chance of safety, had been sacrificed to haste in constructing it. Woods lined it closely on either side. Cuts and boulders flanked the rails with barely enough leeway for the clumsy flat car's sides.

For the best part of the winding upward half mile Gavin walked the track. Then, at an eminence, the gondola car came into view, standing just in front of the quarry mouth and heaped

high above its red sides with the morrow's first cargo of stones. From the same eminence Cole could catch through the foliage an indistinct glimpse of the far end of the track, a half mile below, where several people were moving about. There the railway ceased abruptly, above the core-wall pit into which the stones were to be dumped. It would be a nasty drop for the laden car, should the wheezy engine's brakes and its own fail to keep the pace slow on the downward run. Small wonder auxiliary brakes had been added. The log buffer at the dam pit's verge was flimsy. The deep pit itself was piled with sharp rocks. Gavin did not envy the locomotive driver and any possible passengers their precarious rides.

Cole continued his climb after a minute or so of gazing down at the welter around the distant dam. Much he wished he might go down and look at the work. But he knew he would be regarded not only as an arch-enemy of the enterprise but as a probable spy as well. So, turning his back on the patchy vista of view, he started upward toward the near-by gondola car.

A twist of cut barred the car from his sight. As he came out of the cut he blinked. The gondola was nearer to him than he had thought. Nor was it directly at the quarry's edge. It was some yards down the track.

A second glance at it and Gavin Cole broke into a run.

Somehow the rusted brakes had all at once ceased to hold the laden old car on its incline. Old as the ramshackle gondola itself, they had given way, or perhaps had been released by some mischievous boy. The car was coming down the grade directly toward him.

Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, it was advancing. The tug of weight and of grade were not yet enough to do more than push it forward at a crawl.

But at a hundred yards it would have

gathered momentum enough to send it roaring down the crazy tracks at increasing and dizzy speed.

There could be one of two possible climaxes to the guideless runaway. Either weight and speed would make the heavy gondola jump its insecure tracks, en route, smashing to bits and ripping up the rails or else it would strike the buffer at the track's end with the speed and impact of a thunderbolt, crashing down into the pit with its avalanche of cargo and killing any idlers or guards who might chance to be under there.

On Sundays valley folk had a way of strolling out to look at their fellow valleyite's work. There might well be a half dozen such people, to say nothing of regular Christie employees, somewhere in or around the dam pit. To any or all of them the oncoming car would mean annihilation.

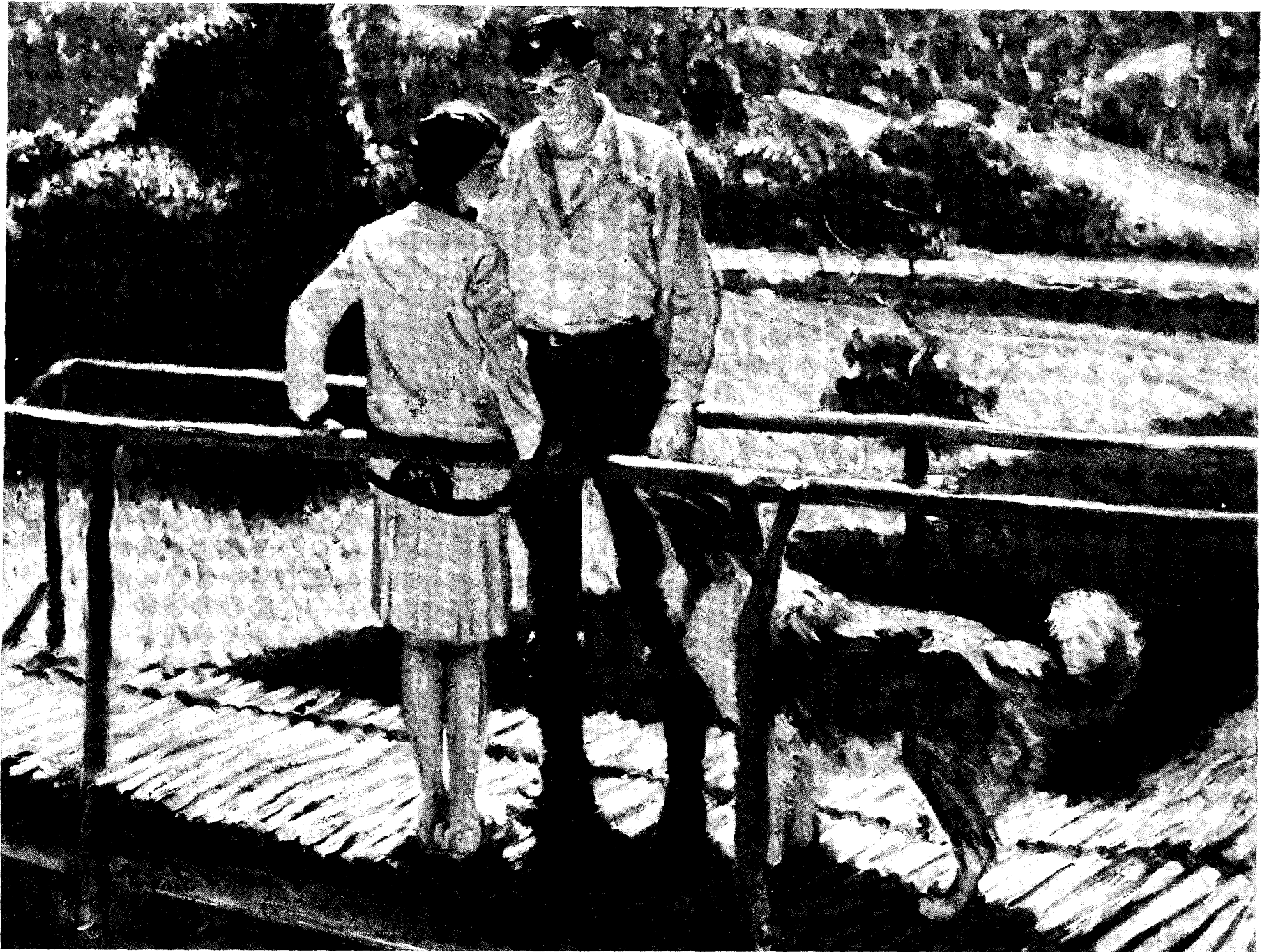
GAVIN COLE broke into a headlong run. There might be a chance to avert the disaster. The car's auxiliary brakes—used only for the steep descents—would not be likely to have been set when the gondola was left at the quarry mouth for the night. The ordinary brakes would have been deemed sufficient to hold it steady. It had been so on the former Sunday when Cole stopped to look at the laden car.

If he could board it, before it got going too fast, and could get at these brakes, the descending monster might be checked before its flight should become irresistible.

Lithely he checked himself as the car rumbled toward him. He stepped out of its path; caught its handhold and swung aboard. He righted himself on the shifting ballast and lurched toward the brakes.

Then, too late, he saw the fatal blunder he had made.

(To be continued next week)



"It means more to me to see you than to see anyone else or everyone else there is"

The Valley Girl

Open warfare, underhanded methods and an unexpected meeting with Faith add despair to Cole's lot in life

By ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, and Wilgus Bett, his employer, are working on a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey against Jeff Christie, who claims to be working a similar plan but Bett says that Christie is working for the water companies.

There is bitter war between the two camps although Cole is in love with Jeff's sister, Faith, though forbidden by Jeff to see her.

Gavin is taking a walk one Sunday up the hill when he sees coming down a track a gondola car full of rock. The brakes have evidently loosened. Gavin jumps up on the car before it is going very fast in order to put on the brakes again and stop it.

INSTINCTIVELY, as he scrambled to his feet amid the sliding mass of rubble stone that heaped the car, Gavin made for the nearer of the two brake wheels.

His careless inspection of the gondola on the only other time he had seen it had shown him that the hand brake was worked from the wheel at the front and that the rear wheel's bearings had been attached to the newly added auxiliary brakes.

In all likelihood the hand brake was out of commission, its rusted and antiquated grip having departed with suddenness and by no apparent outside aid under the continued strain of the car's weight on the grade summit. Such mis-

haps were not new in the story of railroads.

Cole found himself almost at the very rear of the gondola as he recovered his balance. Wherefore he plunged toward the rear brake wheel which controlled the auxiliary.

Even as he took his first swaying step among the shifting rock masses, Gavin's jaw went slack.

The rear brake wheel was gone.

Both fore and aft the wheels had been removed—a simple job requiring no more intricate tools than a monkey wrench. Bent, as by sledge blows, the fore and aft wheel rods stuck naked in air, denuded of the wheels which alone could operate them.

BLANKLY Gavin Cole stared from one to the other of the wrecked appliances. Here was a bit of sabotage, far from new, but hideously effective. It had been the work of only a minute or so for some tolerably skilled man or men up there by the quarry just now to destroy both brake handles; then to loosen the brakes themselves and let the car's weight and the steepness of grade do the rest of the demolition.

During the second or two that Cole

required for the situation to sink into his consciousness the gondola had come to the first steep pitch of track and had trebled speed as it bumped swayingly down the incline.

Gavin was knocked off his feet by the lurch and tumbled rolling into the heap of rock cargo. The stones rolled with him, cutting his palms and bruising him. He staggered up, twice losing foothold in that treacherous mass of small and large rock, loose-piled and swaying.

By the time he could work his way forward and cling to the bent brake post for support the gondola had covered more than half the distance down the incline and was making express-train speed.

It seemed to leap bodily in air once or twice and to leave the crazy track altogether; then, by some miracle of gravitation or of luck, to hit the sleazy rails again.

In and out of the various cuts it whizzed. At such times Cole held his breath and shut his eyes. Should the swinging and rushing car choose such moments to leap the rails, it must dash itself against one of the cut sides. The rest would be horror.

Cole clung to his brake bar, crouching, gasping. He was tempted almost beyond resistance to make an effort to spring clear of the runaway car and to take his chances of landing alive in some trackside thicket which might break the force of his jump.

But he forced the yearning out of his mind. Such a leap would be suicide of an uncommonly messy kind. In every thicket big enough to break the momentum of his flying body there were a dozen tree trunks or boulders, to say nothing of the ever-recurrent cut sides.

There was nothing for it but to hang on. At the thought Gavin peeped ahead down the twisting track and at the rail-side forest which seemed to rush forward at him.

He could not see the end of the line because of a banked curve the car was traversing. But its picture was clear in his memory.

If by some lucky chance the gondola should keep to the rails in rounding this last and steepest and sharpest bend, the rest of the half-mile tree-bordered track lay comparatively straight to the buffer which marked its end—a buffer which the ballast-laden car, at its maniac speed, would snap as a charging bull snaps a dead twig. Then an outward rush through the air for a few yards and the inevitable turtle-turning crash of the rubble-filled gondola into the rocky foundation pit of the Christie dam. Gavin Cole himself could look forward, then, with absolute certainty to burial beneath many tons of rubble, with an overturned gondola freight car for his gravestone.

Now, with a final wild jerk that sent the rubble to rolling afresh, the car was around the bend. Straight ahead ran the track to its silly buffer at the verge of the foundation pit.

Sitting on the buffer were two men, their backs to Gavin. They were leaning down and evidently were talking with someone in the pit below. One or two other men were lounging near.

Cole shouted at the top of his lungs. The wind drove the sound back into his

pistol flew unnoted from his grasp as he fought his way up to his feet again.

This time he was up and gripping the bar in the fraction of a second: the light impact of the branch had given him a mad inspiration. He climbed to the front edge of the gondola's wooden side; still holding on with one hand by the brake's bent bar, squatting there, tense and with every faculty strained.

A hundred feet ahead, barely a dozen yards on the hither side of the buffer and of its fast-scattering group of men, an oak tree jutted a sheaf of branches out over the track, the foliage hanging down to within four or five feet above the gondola's height.

It was a tangle of leaves and boughs; and there was no way for Cole, at that distance and at that speed, to see where leafage ended and branches began; nor how thick were any of these overhanging boughs.

Yet that outjut of foliage was to him his one prospect of avoiding a right unwinning form of death. So he crouched on the swaying and jouncing car front, balancing himself as best he could by means of his hold on the brake bar. Calling on every sinew, he measured the distance as the overhanging boughs flashed nearer.

IN a breath the gondola had come to the leafy overhang and torn past it. In that bare flash of time Gavin Cole gauged his distance and leaped.

Straight upward he launched his muscular young body—up into that tangle of leaf and twig and bough—bounding as high as his trained strength could propel him and with his arms tossed far above his head.

Up into the screen of foliage he shot. His grasping fingers tore through slippery handfuls of leaves and snapping

twigs, as he began to lose momentum and spin downward again.

One hand closed about a wrist-thick oak branch, tough, green, fibrous. Gavin clutched it, bringing his other hand into play, and hung on.

Down dragged the slender branch under the sudden weight. Down swooped Cole, clinging to the pliant bough and drawing his legs up under him.

THE impact as he caught the oaken limb had thrust the branch forward with a yank that almost snapped it. But living oak is strong and tough. Back snapped the bough, cracked and creaking, but otherwise withstanding the assault and rebounding from it in catapult fashion which all but tore Gavin's hands from their convulsive hold.

Then downward swept man and limb under the former's weight—down over the spot where, an instant earlier, the gondola car had rushed.

Cole's feet struck ground in the track's center with a jar that shook him to the marrow. But the springy oak branch had broken the worst of the fall by its own young resiliency and it had let him down to earth with no worse mishap than badly skinned palms and a joggled spine and tingling footsoles.

He let go of his impromptu trapeze-bar, plunged awkwardly and righted himself, standing there panting and jarred and bruised, the blood trickling from his abraded palms.

At the moment nobody among the little clump of men in front was looking at him. Huddled, they were staring over the brink of the foundation pit.

The gondola had touched the thick log buffer in mid-flight, converting it into flying matchwood. Then the rock-laden car had slewed sidewise as its smoking wheels left the rails for the few feet of trackless space between buffer and pit rim.

Next flinging itself into the air, it had bounced clean over the rim and landed at the pit bottom upside down in its own cargo. The cloud of dust from the demolished car and the tons of downflung rock were

rising chokingly, enveloping the horror-stricken watchers.

All this Gavin noted dazedly as he stood in mid-track. Then one of the men at the rim spun about and faced him. It was Jeff Christie.

Of the others who turned, in imitation of Christie, only three were known by sight to Cole. These three were the men who had passed him at the hand bridge so short a time ago.

Cole frowned perplexedly as he recognized them. Into his overwrought mind had flitted a suspicion that they had preceded him to the quarry and had loosed on him the loaded gondola. But he saw they could not possibly have done so and then have arrived at the dam foundations ahead of him.

Nor, he realized now, would they have sought to damage their own employer's valuable property and delay the progress of Christie's work on the mere chance that the descending car might hit the intruder before he could get out of its path. Such an idea savored of sensational motion-picture methods rather than of calm sanity.

COLE had but the merest instant to ponder on the mystery's new angle before Jeff Christie had come up to him and stood looking him fiercely in the eyes.

Christie's face was working. His fists were clenched. He had just seen the wrecking of an important part of his enterprise. He knew better than anyone else what the delay and the cash damage must entail. He was facing a loss of time and of money which he could not spare. It was not to be expected that he would look with any degree of affection at the field commander of the rival venture.

Yet his first words bewildered Gavin—until their purport had time to waken in him a wholesome anger.

"Next time," drawled Christie, his voice rasping like a file and held in check by manifest effort—"next time you try that kind of sabotage, I suggest you remember to jump as soon as you've loosed the brakes. Don't lose your nerve and hang on board the way you did today."

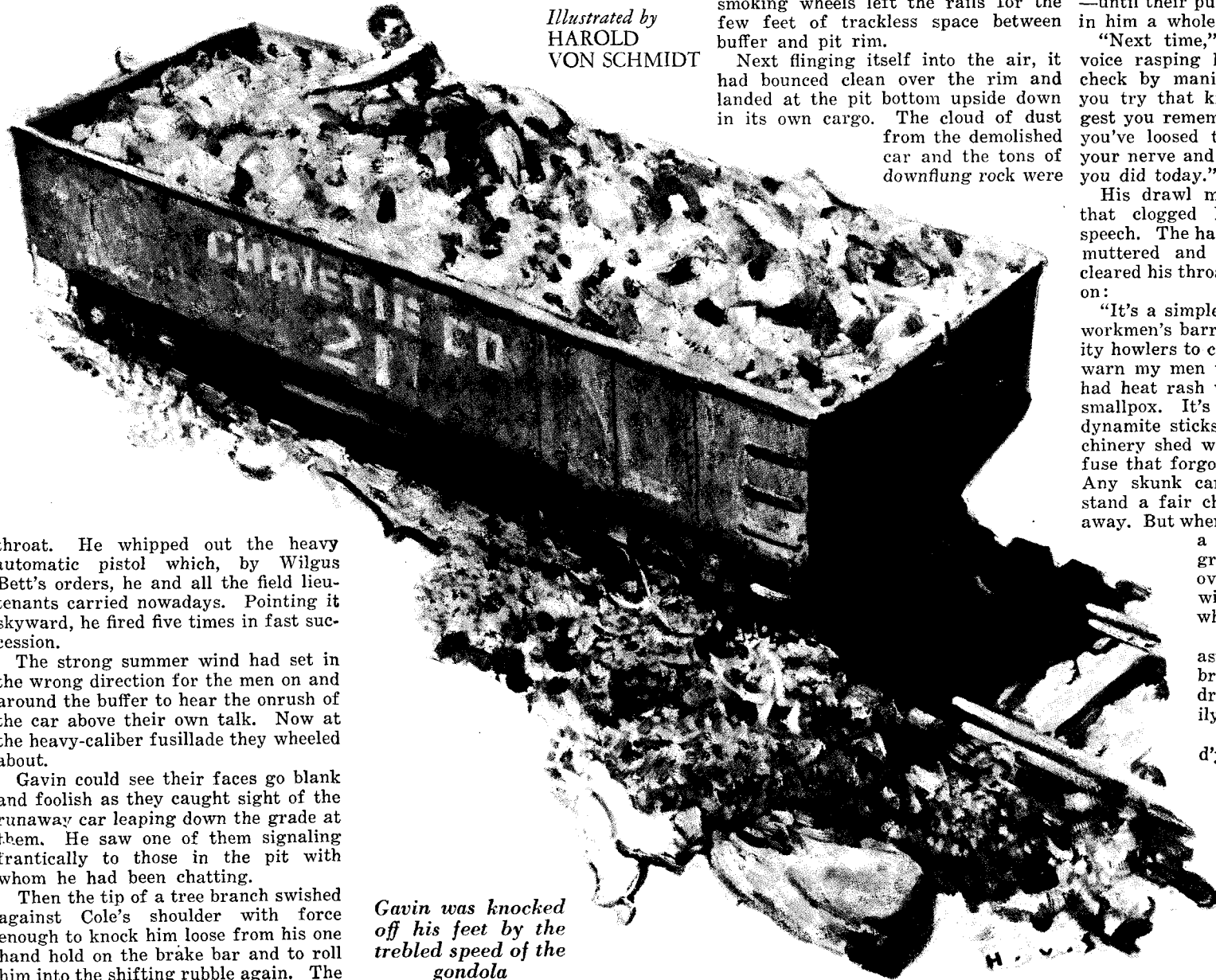
His drawl merged into a thickness that clogged his forcedly measured speech. The handful of men behind him muttered and drew closer. Christie cleared his throat impatiently, and went on:

"It's a simple thing to set fire to my workmen's barracks and to hire calamity howlers to come here as doctors and warn my men that three of them who had heat rash were coming down with smallpox. It's easy to put a bunch of dynamite sticks under my biggest machinery shed with a time fuse—a time fuse that forgot to go off, by the way. Any skunk can do those things and stand a fair chance of making a getaway. But when it comes to fooling with a freight car on a down grade, you'd best turn it over next time to someone with nerve. In the meanwhile—"

A gurgle of stark astonishment from Cole broke in on the half-drawled, half-snarled homily:

"Do you—are you—d'you mean you think I smashed the brakes and started your gondola downhill?" demanded Gavin hoarsely. "If you do, there isn't any need for more talk. Take your coat off. I'd thrash my own father for accusing me of—" (Continued on page 41)

Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT



throat. He whipped out the heavy automatic pistol which, by Wilgus Bett's orders, he and all the field lieutenants carried nowadays. Pointing it skyward, he fired five times in fast succession.

The strong summer wind had set in the wrong direction for the men on and around the buffer to hear the onrush of the car above their own talk. Now at the heavy-caliber fusillade they wheeled about.

Gavin could see their faces go blank and foolish as they caught sight of the runaway car leaping down the grade at them. He saw one of them signaling frantically to those in the pit with whom he had been chatting.

Then the tip of a tree branch swished against Cole's shoulder with force enough to knock him loose from his one hand hold on the brake bar and to roll him into the shifting rubble again. The

Gavin was knocked off his feet by the trebled speed of the gondola

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Christie's coat was on the ground beside Cole's before the words were fairly out. But two or three of the other men crowded between the belligerents.

"Leave him to us, chief!" begged one of them. "We'll—"

"You've got him with the goods," declared another in the same breath, but more loudly and insistently. "Don't spoil it by scrapping. You've been wanting proof that the Bett crowd are working sabotage on you. Now you've got your proof. We've caught this Cole cuss with the goods. All we've got to do is hold him here till we can phone the sheriff. He—"

"WHAT did you do to the feller on guard up there at the quarry?" yelled a third man, thrusting his raging face close to Gavin's. "He's my brother. And he don't go to sleep on no job neither. Nor yet you couldn't have downed him in clean fight. He never even gave the alarm. What'd you do to him? If you've—"

"Shut up, Lerner," commanded Jeff Christie, stemming the multiple torrent of words and hauling the speaker backward by the collar as he seemed about to launch himself on Cole. "If there's slugging to be done here, I'll do it. Chase up to the quarry and see what's happened to your brother. Come back quick and let me know. Perhaps he's been killed by this noble spy. Chase!"

With elaborate civility Christie addressed the raging Gavin:

"I'm afraid the examination must wait till Lerner comes back with his report," said he. "Killing or maiming a guard is not on the free list, even in this era of valley warfare. When you began your pleasant sabotage tactics, I set guards over some of my less sparable equipment. I didn't realize that you might add manslaughter or mayhem to your other manly pastimes."

The man's elephantine sarcasm was as hard-held as had been his earlier drawl. But it cooled Gavin's blind rage to a deadlier calm.

"One minute, please," he interposed, noting that four or five men had ranged themselves between Christie and himself as if to balk any further attempt of his at physical attack. "One minute. You can spend it in thinking up new wise cracks if you like. But there's something that even a muttonhead like yourself can see, if you'll only stop to think. It's this: if I was a mayhem fancier or cared to spend my day of rest in dabbling in manslaughter, I could have had my fill of both a few moments ago. I could have gotten off that runaway gondola—as I did get off it—and before I got off, I needn't have wasted good pistol shots in making you people turn around to see what was bearing down on you. If I had minded my own business, instead of giving that alarm, there might be crape on a few doors in the valley by tonight. Those of you who were in the pit down yonder could never have got out of the car's way before it landed on you, even if the men sitting on the buffer had seen the danger in time to sidestep. So much for that end of the argument."

He paused. One or two of the men glanced furtively at each other. Even Christie's white anger seemed to blend with a sudden perplexity. In the scurry and turmoil and shock of the past minute or so all of them had forgotten the pistol-shot warning which had enabled them to jump clear of the on-flying death machine.

"While you're explaining that away," continued Gavin, "here's another thing to think about: whoever started the gondola down the track must have known there were likely to be people loitering around the pit on Sundays. If he cared to give them a warning—which he didn't—would he have risked his own life by riding downhill on the car for the sake of firing alarm shots? If he would, then I'm the man who set your gondola in motion. Also, I'm the

man who discovered America. Think it over."

The first outburst of wrath was ebbing as his hearers mulled over his half-smiling words. Jeff Christie muttered to the man nearest him:

"I wonder if the brakes gave way of themselves. They were pretty old and—"

"No," broke in Gavin, overhearing, "they didn't. When you go down into the pit and take a look at the gondola you'll see they didn't. Both brake wheels were taken off, and the rods were bent with a hammer or a rock. The man who did the job made it so complete that nobody could climb aboard and stop the car after it got under way. I know, because that's what I tried to do."

"I saw it coming toward me before it had gone a hundred feet. It was moving slow enough for me to board it. I ran to put on the brakes. It was then I saw the wheels were gone. I slipped on the pile of stones she was loaded with. By the time I could get up we were going too fast for me to jump off."

"That's all, except that I was on a hike through the hills when I saw the car moving. I'm telling you this yarn for my own sake, not for yours. You don't believe it, and I'm not interested in making you believe it."

"Now, since you're too prudent to fight a man you've insulted and since your crowd is too many for me, I'll wait here quietly while you phone for the sheriff. Only, if any officious fool tries to make a hit with you by grabbing me, he's going to the hospital. Then you'll have a real mayhem charge to make against me with plenty of witnesses."

He walked over to an upturned keg and seated himself on it, beginning to study his own mangled palms and ignoring the men he had been haranguing.

A confusion of low-pitched voices broke in upon the instant's puzzled silence which followed his speech. But in the timbre of the various mingled tones, now, there was far more perplexity than anger.

CHRISTIE walked over to the edge of the foundation pit and stared down. Presently he returned to the others.

"Both the brake wheels are gone," he told them. "If they had been knocked off when the car hit the bottom, they'd be somewhere in sight."

"Mightn't be," urged another man. "Plenty of debris to cover them."

"Hold on," interposed another speaker—with the corner of his eye Cole could see he was one of the trio he had met beside the hand bridge—"Hold on. I've been figuring this out. I was coming back here with Rice and Dixon, from Woollet, just a little while ago. This man was just in front of us. He couldn't have got to the quarry, even if he'd run every step up the hill, and licked Pete Lerner to a standstill and then taken the brake wheels off the car and climbed aboard it. No, nor yet he couldn't have got there in time to boss the job if one of his men was doing it."

Christie was looking strangely at Cole. Suddenly Jeff's resolve was taken.

"Mr. Cole," he said stiffly, yet with no trace of his recent anger, "may I remind you that you are trespassing on posted ground, and ask you to take yourself off it as soon as you can? I owe you an apology for accusing you of wrecking my car. I was wrong. But I am not apologizing. You couldn't have committed this particular act of sabotage; but under your orders far worse things have been done to my equipment during the past month. I needn't cite the list. You're familiar with it. So please get back to your own land and your own kind of people without further talk."

"You ordered me off your land once before," returned Gavin, without getting up from his keg. "That time I went. I'm going today. But not till you have the squareness to explain to me what you've meant by saying I or our

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men committed sabotage here. There is no sense in my giving my word where it won't be believed. Otherwise I'd give you my word of honor that I have not committed or ordered any sabotage or any other dirty act, and that to the best of my knowledge and honest belief none of our men have committed any."

Christie frowned, his lean face worriedly uncertain. One of his men laughed in elaborate derision at Cole's quietly worded statement.

"Shut up!" Jeff bade the mirthful one. "Even a cur doesn't usually pledge his word, unasked, to a lie. There's a mix-up here that I—"

"When you have been handling construction gangs as long as I have, Mr. Christie," suggested Cole, "you'll know that every time a careless drunkard leaves a tap running or leaves a lighted cigarette near a pile of waste or bungles a machine till it's out of gear, there's always a hoot of 'Sabotage!' Our outfit doesn't need to wreck your stuff, any more than we'd need to stack the cards in playing poker with a baby. We've got you licked, ten ways from the jack—you and the coyly invisible interests behind you. You won't even get the traditional thirty pieces for betraying this valley of yours."

CHRISTIE went red and took a step forward. This time nobody interfered, for everybody was staring up the rail-ripped track. Christie, in mid-advance, stopped and stared with them.

Down the track was coming Lerner. Leaning heavily on him, and more carried than walking, was a man in khaki—a man whose head was swathed in two joined and dirty handkerchiefs, their grayish surfaces soaked in blood.

By the time he was in earshot Lerner began to shout his report to the men who hurried to meet him.

"There he was!" he yelled furiously. "There was poor old Pete, here, a-laying on the ground, under the quarry shed; clean knocked out. 'Twasn't till I dowsed a pail of water over him that he came to. Look at that swat somebody give him from behind!" he orated, jerking the handkerchief bandage away and revealing a fair-sized contusion at the back of the skull. "That's why Pete didn't stop the car from cutting loose. He was out."

Catching sight of Gavin Cole seated on the keg, he left his brother to the attention of the men who had crowded around them. Fists a-swing, Lerner strode truculently up to the seated man.

Gavin, deep in thought about this deliberate sabotage, scarcely noted his approach until the avenger was almost upon him.

Head down and arms flailing, Lerner rushed him. More by boxing instinct than conscious action, Gavin slipped from his keg seat, ducking a frantic swing and stepping out of reach.

Lerner checked his futile rush and charged afresh, hurling himself at Cole as the others yelled to him to desist and as they ran forward to lay hold of him.

They were not quick enough.

In plunged Lerner, bull-like in blind battle rage. Gavin set himself and struck, moving his head an inch or so to one side to miss the laborer's ham-like and whizzing right fist.

Cole's calmly planted blow caught Lerner neatly on the chin, perhaps an inch to the right of the unshaven jaw point. Lerner was lunging forward with his whole body at the time, thus doubling the blow's already tremendous impetus.

The laborer's toes lifted clean off the ground as Gavin's punch sounded sharp and murderous against his jaw. Lerner's knees turned to tallow. He slumped forward on his face and lay there twitching a little.

The other men reached the scene of brief warfare too late to interfere or even to catch the victim as he fell.

"This seems to be an off day for the Lerner brothers," commented Gavin as he surveyed his own barked knuckles and tensed his tingling left arm. "Mr.

Christie, I am sorry to have had to put this man out. But you saw for yourself it was he or I. I'm sorrier to believe you are right when you call this car business a piece of sabotage. I am going to carry the case to headquarters. I'm going to find out who has done this, and when I do I'm going to handle him a lot worse than I handled Lerner. After that I'm going to fire him. Good-by."

He walked through the knot of undecided and muttering men, close past Christie, and bent his steps toward Regin.

With homemade rod in hand, a Bett roustabout whom Cole recognized was lying on the river bank, fishing. Gavin

her in the dash to greet Gavin. Now across the little span Cole and she faced each other.

Wordlessly each was taking furtive note of the other. Faith saw with an unwilling constriction of heart that Cole was more gaunt and hollow-eyed than she remembered him; that he looked infinitely older and unhappy.

The grindingly endless work and responsibility and the sketchiness of rest hours were taking outward toll of his whalebone constitution. His boyishness had gone. He looked stern and half-sick beneath his almost African tan.

Gavin was making a like appraisal of the troubled little face at the bridge's far end. It was less softly full than he remembered it. There was a new sharpness of line to the prominent jaw. The level dark eyes were no longer joyously childlike in their outlook.

On queer impulse he strode across the bridge and up to her.

"Listen!" he exclaimed, his hands outstretched. "You and I are behaving like two cranky kids. We were good chums, and neither of us has done anything to make us less so. Suppose we do happen to be on different sides in this valley squabble. Why must it spoil our friendship? Please say it needn't. Won't you? It means such a lot to me."

Faith had been aptly prepared for this encounter. She knew it must come, soon or late. In the valley's lower end everyone was certain to meet everyone else some time or other. Indeed, it was strange that she and Cole had not happened to see each other again, somewhere on the road or in Regin or Woollet, long before now.

The girl had anticipated the meeting. In fact, she had formed a habit of putting herself to sleep at night by anticipating it. Again and again, on the borders of drowseland, she set the scene and devised and rehearsed the lines for it.

Sometimes in these rehearsals she passed Cole haughtily on the road, moving aside just a trifle farther than really was necessary and with an aspect of unseeing aloofness tinged just a little with distaste.

At other times Gavin would meet her and hold out his hand, a hypocritical smile on his face. Then Faith would ignore the hand, of course, and would repeat the performance of the passing-by scene, only with a negative inclination of the head.

Then there was a really strong scene, wherein Cole asked her why she seemed to avoid him. With a laugh as mirthless as it was icily cutting she would make any one of seven scathing replies.

As he shrank back from the civilly murderous retort she made the exit prepared for in Scene One.

IN HER waking hours she would not let her mind dwell on him long enough for one of these rehearsals, nor for a single instant. But she was disgusted with herself because of her dire need to be on guard forever against the impertinent intrusion of his memory into her consciousness.

Here in real life she was meeting him at last. Nor was it a sudden encounter. She had seen him a furlong away as both of them were nearing the Regins-kill from opposite sides. For a panic instant she had longed to turn and flee.

Then she had rallied fiercely. She was on her own brother's land, on a Sunday walk with her own dog. It was not for her to sink back like a trespasser. No, she would go straight ahead. When he and she should come face to face, it would be a gorgeous time to profit by her bedtime rehearsals.

She tingled at the prospect. And yet—how wearily he walked and how depressed was every line and motion of his stocky body! Perhaps he was ill. Perhaps—

Then, collie fashion, Heather had spoiled everything by scampering forward in that idiotically welcoming way, as if to salute the dearest friend in the world. When the dog pushed past her



"The Prince of Wales," by L. F. Bekken, Ashland, Wis.

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"George Washington," by G. W. Compton, Scranton, Pa.

at the bridge end she had some vague idea, from his impetuosity, that he might be going to hurl himself ragingly on the trespasser. If he did, naturally it would be her Christian duty to rescue the man.

She could follow her deed of mercy with some such cold interruption to his humble thanks as:

"I would have done the same thing for any tramp on the road."

But Heather did not give her the chance, even as she had been morbidly certain he would not. Still, there was ample time for her to move aside from the bridge end as Gavin hurried toward her. She could step back, as from some mildly loathsome creature. Indeed, she had moved backward an inch or two, when he blurted his appeal to her and stretched out impulsively both his arms in her general direction.

Too many rehearsals, even a too-perfect dress rehearsal, may mar the excellence of a performance. Perhaps Faith had rehearsed too often and too much to her own satisfaction. For, though she was perfect in her chosen rôle's lines and stage business, she found herself crying out as she caught the proffered hands in her own:

"Oh, your poor, poor hands! What on earth have you done to them? They must hurt horribly!"

GAVIN followed her anxiously sympathetic gaze down to his torn and skinned palms and barked knuckles. The hands were bleeding and were scored by furrows of ripped skin, and they were unspeakably dirty.

In a feeling of sudden shame he pulled them away from her adorably cool grasp and hid them behind his back. Then, too late, he yearned to kick himself for the instinctive withdrawal which had wrecked a heaven-sent chance. He had thrown away the only card he held or ever could hope to hold.

The keen sympathy still was lighting her tanned little face and brimming her big eyes. But now in those eager eyes of hers there was the first flicker of returning self-possession.

The man longed to reel weakly against the hand-rail or even to swoon at her feet—in fact, to do anything asinine and unmanly, to keep that first divine look in her dear eyes. But, manlike, he heard himself saying, confusedly:

"It isn't anything at all, Miss Christie. I—I stumbled and landed on my hands among some stones; the way we used to do when we were kids. Only there's more of me to land on them than there was then. That's why it looks so messy. Won't you forgive me for showing such hideous things at you? I didn't think. You see, I was so glad to see you again—"

"Why?" she asked, very coolly, almost as correctly as in a rehearsal.

"Why was I glad to see you? I suppose I ought to stammer and then think up some clever answer. But I can't. I was glad to see you and I was knocked off my self-control, because—because it means more to me to see you than to see anyone else or everyone else there is. There, you have it. Though why I'm fool enough to say such a thing—"

"Yes," she told him evenly, "it is rather unnecessary, isn't it? I'm sorry about your hands, though. They ought to be attended to, at once, oughtn't they?"

She stepped aside, to give him room to pass her. Stupidly he looked down at his tortured palms and cut knuckles, then hid them once more behind him.

"I suppose so," said he. "But there's time enough for that. Can—can I walk on with you a little way? You know, even the fields aren't oversafe, nowadays."

"Yes," she made answer, wholly herself again. "I know it. All of us in the valley have the best reasons for knowing it. But here on my brother's own farm—"

"I wish I could tell you how horribly sorry I am that the Reginskill country is turned upside down like this," pleaded Gavin. "If I could stop it by giving up my job, I'd resign today, even if I'm getting better pay than ever before and even though it's my one chance. But it wouldn't do any good. In an hour they'd

have another man in my place, and the work would go right on. I—"

"I wouldn't dream of expecting you to give up your treasured job," said Faith. "I know how much it must mean to you. And what is the wrecking of just one or two harmless communities compared to your making a record salary and having the wonderful chance you've won for yourself? It—"

"Please!" he begged.

"Please, what?" she asked innocently. "Surely you've won the right to large salary and to your chance, as you call it. I remember how affectingly you told me of your quixotism in throwing over your whole future sooner than to help destroy a Catskill valley. It is only fair, when you've seen the error of your folly, to recoup your losses by helping to destroy a North Jersey valley."

"I am working night and day to save this valley of yours from being destroyed!" he flared hotly, stung out of his pleading mood. "And from being destroyed from within too. Some day you'll realize that. In the meantime I can't say anything to prove it to you. So—"

"No," she assented, "I'm afraid you can't."

"I haven't done anything to forfeit your liking," he declared as she made as though to move past him. "That's true whether you believe it or not. You pretend, even to yourself, that you don't believe me. But in your heart you do believe me. I don't know what your precious brother may have said to you about me. But if he said I wasn't as fit to be an acquaintance of yours as any man on earth, he lied. He—"

"I think," she reminded him, "it can't be good for your hurt hands to make so many violent gestures. And I suggest, when your hands are well, that you tell my brother, face to face, that he lies, instead of saying it to someone who can only resent it by asking you not to speak to her again. Now, if I may trouble you to move far enough to one side, I would like to cross the bridge and go on with my walk."

Yes, she had every reason to be proud of this only speech in her galaxy of oft-rehearsed scenes which she had been able to deliver with only trivial verbal changes. But somehow she could not feel proud of herself.

She could feel nothing, for the instant, but a crazy yearning to cry—this, coupled with a crazier yearning to soak her handkerchief in the cool water and sponge softly the grime and pebble points from the man's suffering hands.

Thoroughly ashamed of her own mushiness of heart, she took a step forward, laying her hand on the rustic bridge rail. Sulkily Gavin Cole moved aside to let her pass him. His own excoriated left hand gripped the rail scarcely twelve inches from her ungloved fingers.

AT THE same moment something jarred the thin rail as by a sharp kick. A flap of grayish bark and wood flew up midway between their two hands. A few tiny splinters danced in air.

Beneath the upflung flap of wood a narrow groove showed across the top of the rail.

Heather burst into frantically excited barking, his fanfare of racket half drowning a sharper cracking sound from the edge of the strip of forest beyond.

Gavin wheeled about to trace the direction of this telltale report. At an outjutting point of the woods hung momentarily a faint fluff of smoke.

"Get behind that tree!" ordered Cole, pointing to an oak at the side of the bridge. "He's not aiming at you. But at this range he may miss again, next time he fires. Put the tree between you and him. It's me he wants. And it's me he's due to get. Unless I get him first. That is what I'm going to do if I can."

He threw the words peremptorily at her over his shoulder. Already he was in motion, running at top speed toward the vanishing fluff of rifle smoke at the forest edge.

Not troubling to zigzag or otherwise to disturb the unseen marksman's aim, he charged headlong for his goal.

(To be continued next week)

The Valley Girl

*The leopard's spots
begin to be visible
but not to Gavin*

By
**ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE**

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, and Wilgus Bett, his employer, are working on a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey against Jeff Christie, who claims to be working a similar plan but Bett says that Christie is working for the water companies.

There is bitter war between the two camps although Cole is in love with Jeff's sister, Faith, though forbidden by Jeff to see her.

Gavin is taking a walk one Sunday up the hill when he sees coming down a track a gondola car full of rock. The brakes have evidently loosened. Gavin jumps up on the car before it is going very fast in order to put on the brakes again and stop it, only to find that the brakes have been removed. The car gathers speed. Gavin shoots his pistol to warn the people ahead, then grabs a tree branch and drops to the ground while the car forges ahead, off the track into the pit at the end which is part of Christie's enterprise.

Gavin's warning had saved the lives of Christie and several of his men but Christie is convinced that Cole is to blame for this piece of sabotage as well as many others which he claims have been perpetrated. Cole assures him that he knows nothing of this and will investigate. Then he goes off, unexpectedly meeting Faith. He is talking to her, trying to renew their friendship, when a shot goes whizzing by them. Faith gets behind a tree and Gavin runs toward the tree from which the shot came.

AT GAVIN'S third step in his spring toward the jut of woodland whence the rifle shot had been fired something frisked merrily past him and took the lead in the race.

Heather had been delighted to see his glum human pal shake off his depression so quickly and start across the meadow in what very evidently was an invitation to a romp. Blithely the big bronze collie had accepted the invitation.

Perhaps there is no other dog with a collie's mystic sensitiveness to human moods. During Cole's brief talk with Faith, Heather had been keenly aware that both of them were wretchedly unhappy. From one to the other he had glanced worriedly in pathetically helpless sympathy.

Then had come the ping of the rifle ball, the missing of Gavin's broad back by the fraction of an inch and the chipping of the hand rail's seasoned wood. Heather's plangent bark of excitement at the startling phenomenon had burst forth even before the report of the shot reached Gavin and the girl.

Instantly the erstwhile miserable man had sprung into what appeared to Heather a glad some activity. Wherefore Heather, not to be outdone in cheeriness, frolicked after the fast-running Cole, overtaking and passing him in a gay flurry of speed.

Having shown his own easy superiority as a racer, the dog wheeled back to his chum and began to circle the running man's legs in a bark-punctuated gallop, making little jocose dives at Gavin's ankles.

No collie man lives who has not had this maddening experience with his dog in some moment of stark haste. Cole's

obvious remedy was to aim a kick at the frisking Heather.

But, not being of the type of human that can find no better way of showing his own inferiority to a dog than by kicking him, he forebore. Instead he shouted angrily to the collie to keep out of his way.

Heather, in the jocund exaltation of the moment, chose to interpret the loud protest as a phase of the rollicking game he and Cole were playing. He answered the impatient shout by a salvo of barks and leaped enthusiastically up at the pestered runner.

As an immediate result Gavin was tripped by the bounding bronze body. Man and dog rolled over and over in the lush meadow grass.

Profanely Cole scrambled to his feet, in towering wrath ordering Heather back to his mistress. Then he continued his own ludicrously interrupted charge for the near-by woodland.

Heather's breath had been knocked out by the vehement fall of Cole's 170 pounds of muscular weight full atop him. His tender ribs had been bruised by the same vehement impact, his absurdly tender collie sensibilities had been hurt worst of all by the uncalled-for roughness of his playfellow and by the crowning affront of being ordered back from the romp.

Plumed tail a-droop and furry ears flattened against his skull, the collie turned about and prepared to stalk haughtily away from the man who could not appreciate his efforts at merriment.

But as he turned he saw something which revived his crushed feelings. His dear mistress had joined in the turbulent revel.

Faith had disregarded Cole's command to shield herself behind the oak tree from the peril of possible future bullets. She followed at top speed the man's fierce rush. His fall and awkward recovery almost gave her time to catch up with him. Now they were nearing the woods.

HEATHER took heart and cantered blithely up to them, willing and eager to romp afresh. They did not heed him nor had Cole so much as seen the girl.

But as Heather's barking broke forth once more Gavin glanced behind him, to ward against further tripping up by the marplot collie. It was then he saw Faith running with amazing swiftness and bent on catching up with him.

"Go back!" he bade her sharply; pausing in his pell-mell progress and thrusting himself directly in front of her as a shield against shots from the ambush. "Go back! You're in danger. He wouldn't mean to hit you. But he—"

She lacked breath to answer him, but she struggled furiously to prevent him from using his own body as a rampart between her and the woods.



Illustrated by
**HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT**

*"There's no use your
wasting breath by tell-
ing my sister I'm not a
murderer"*

In another second he sprang away from her and in a final dash gained the fringe of outjutting forest whence the shot had sounded.

"Heather!" he commanded as the collie flashed into the shade with him. "Heather! Get him!"

As he spoke he pointed ahead into the thick screen of leafage. No sign of human life was visible there. Yet Cole was certain that the shot had been fired from this very spot where he had halted. To confirm his belief, a brass rifle shell lay among the ferns at his feet, its curve catching an errant ray of filtered sunlight amid the shadows. Cole picked up the shell.

The would-be assassin had melted into the greenery. It might well be an impossible quest to thrash about in the undergrowth looking for him. Hence Gavin's order to the dog.

"Get him, Heather!" he said again. "He can't have gone far in this time. Get him!"

The collie read easily the mandate and noted the tense savageness behind it. Thrilled at prospect of a hunt, he sniffed

the slightly trampled fern carpet, then lunged forward through the screen of verdure.

Gavin followed, crashing aside the branches and leaves that shut off his vision. Again he realized that Faith was at his side, resolutely pushing on with him.

Before he could beg her to turn back or could more than grasp the fact that she had plunged into the recent ambush with him, they had penetrated the green network as though it were a curtain, and they found themselves in a cleared space perhaps forty feet in diameter, hemmed in on every side by the verdant walls.

HEATHER had reached the far end of the clearing in his questioning gallop, nose to earth. His tail was waving expectantly. The hackles were not lifted as they would have been were he trailing an enemy or even a stranger.

Through the farther wall of green he loped, tail awag, and breaking into a welcoming fanfare of barks.

"It's a man of your brother's," Gavin



told Faith as he hurried in pursuit—"a man Heather knows and likes. He—" "No man of Jeff's would do such a hideous thing!" flared Faith, still panting from her sprinting run. "He—" Her panted words were choked in an unbelieving gasp of horror.

AS GAVIN reached the leaf barrier close behind Heather the branches in front of him parted abruptly. Out into the cleared space stepped Jeff Christie. Under his arm was a rifle.

For an instant he and Gavin Cole confronted each other wordlessly, while Heather pranced about them both in glad pride at having found the man whom Cole had sent him to look for.

Then Faith was between the two silent enemies, staring incredulously up into her brother's set face.

"Jeff!" she whispered. "JEFF!"

That was all. Then her head went forward like a little child's between her bronzed hands, and her slender body shook with uncontrolled weeping. She cried as children cry in times of utter

heartbreak: without restraint or art, sobbing in hopeless abandon.

Gavin Cole's throat constricted. Mightily he yearned to gather her into his arms and hold her close to his breast, hushing her body-shaking sobs and soothing her as he would have soothed a stricken baby.

Still Jeff spoke no word, but stared alternately at his weeping sister and at Cole. In his face were many fleeting emotions. But perplexity dominated them as he watched Faith's sudden grief.

"Don't," adjured Cole, laying a hand on Faith's heaving shoulder—then moving it hastily as he saw the blood smear his torn palm had left on her light morning dress.

"Don't!" he repeated gently. "I know what you're thinking, Miss Christie. And you're dead wrong. I'll take my oath on that. Your brother wasn't the man who fired at me. I'm not saying it just to make you feel better. It's gospel truth. He didn't shoot at me, and he didn't give the order to shoot me. You've got to believe that."

Faith lifted her tear-sorrowed face

from her hands and eyed him doubtfully through swimming eyes. Blurred though her vision was, she saw he was in earnest.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Christie, finding his tongue. "There's no need of your wasting breath by telling my sister I'm not a murderer. She knows that. She knows I didn't—"

"Perhaps she does," assented Gavin, dryly. "Perhaps she was just crying for her own amusement; perhaps she stopped because she was tired and not because I told her it wasn't you who took that pot shot at me. Anyhow, so long as she's stopped, I don't care how she was made to stop. And now, as you've overhauled your loyal henchman and taken his gun away from him, I'll be on my way. I feel a bit like the man of the fable who went hunting for a rabbit and found a bear. I came here on the rush, hoping to catch friend Lerner and to kick him a couple of times to show him it isn't polite to ambush a man when he's standing so near a girl that the bullet might hit her. Since you've taken charge of the case, perhaps you'll tell him so yourself. Good-by."

He turned to go. But Faith interfered. Still trembling, she asked:

"Lerner? Do you mean you believe Peter Lerner—?"

"No," denied Gavin.

"Not Pete. Pete's emotional brother. I don't know the brother's first name. Maybe his godfather and godmother in baptism didn't bother to give him one. Pete is the guard up at the quarry. His brother found him there today senseless. He came down to the dam, lugging him along and lugging his rifle too. Luckily he laid down the rifle before he came over to accuse me of manhandling brother Pete. But I infer he annexed it again as soon as I was gone and came after me. I gather your brother saw him go, gave chase, and got here just after the shot was fired. He grabbed the rifle and sent Lerner about his business. I'm right, am I not, Christie? Yes?" he added, as Christie made no reply, but averted his head in what might have been construed into a negative shake. "Yes, I thought so. I—"

"JEFF!" cried Faith distractedly. "What does he mean? I don't understand any of it at all. Did one of the Lerner's really—?"

"Please, Miss Christie!" expostulated Gavin. "I wish you wouldn't worry about it any longer. Your brother will tell you the whole silly story when I'm gone. As to being potted from cover, it was mild compared to the risks both Christie and I had to take every hour for weeks at a time in France a few years ago. The only thing about it that riled me was Lerner's opening fire when I was standing near you. But I'm sure Christie will warn him to wait next time till I'm alone. Won't you, Christie?"

At the implication Jeff's swart face purpled.

"You have the right to say that," he said in a studiously calm voice, "after what's just happened. But there's no use of reminding you that it isn't an especially sportsmanly thing to say. The kind of man who could be helped by such a reminder wouldn't be the kind of man who would say the thing. Lerner gets out of my employ today, and out of this valley tomorrow. You have my word for that. I don't think there's anything more to say, is there?"

"No," answered Gavin uncomfortably. "There isn't. Except that I spoke rottenly when I hinted you'd sick Lerner or anyone else on to shooting me. It wasn't true, and I'm sorry. I guess my nerves are getting frazzled by things that are piling up on me a bit too fast. I'm sorry, Christie."

Faith took a half step forward as if to detain him. But her brother moved in front of her. Then the leafage closed behind the departing Gavin.

Cole did not pause nor look back as he emerged from the woods into the meadow. Still walking at a fast pace, he reached the hand bridge, crossing it without a glance at the telltale bullet groove. . . .

BACK to Regin he made his hasty way and straight into the august presence of Wilgus Bett.

He found the overlord still in his improvised office at the Eagle Hotel, dismissing the last of a line of men to whom he had been issuing orders or to whose report he had listened.

Gavin Cole entered the sacred precincts without ceremony, shutting the door behind a departing subengineer.

"Mr. Bett," he announced, "I've run into something this morning that you ought to be told about—something that's got to be stopped in a rush, as you'll see. I—"

"You must have run into it with both hands wide open in front of you," commented Bett lazily as he noted the mangled palms of his lieutenant. "Been climbing trees or sliding down a rope? Sit down, boy. You look all in. Now, what's the matter?"

Abruptly Gavin told the tale of his morning's exploits, laying bare the evidence of deliberate and well-nigh fatal sabotage on the part of someone in the Bett gang.

Wilgus heard him through without interruption and with a face as expressionless as the side of a coal bin. For an instant after the tale was told the suave giant sat thus. Then, as if by a sharp secret effort, he went into action.

Jumping nimbly to his feet, he began to pace the creaking floor, kicking aside a rug that he had snarled.

"This won't do!" he rumbled. "This will never do, boy! Let the newspapers get a hint that there's been sabotage and they'll twist it into every crime in the calendar. They'll make us out a bunch of crooks. Public sympathy will set dead against us. And with the public actively against us, we'd have hard sledding. I'll make inquiries. If we can get hold of the crank or the joker who's doing this kind of funny business we'll make an example of him. I'm glad you found it out and told me."

"There's another element to this that you don't seem to think of," said Gavin. "We've given Christie and his outfit the right to believe we're the kind of people who authorize that kind of game. We've got a black eye. How about writing to Christie and disclaiming all responsibility and saying you'll make up for any losses he can show he has incurred through crooks in our camp and promise him to investigate and punish?"

"Grand!" scoffed Bett. "In other words, to go on record, in writing, as confessing that sabotage has been

worked by our crowd! That would be a lovely document for him to turn over to the newspapers, wouldn't it? Can't you see, boy, it would be?"

"I can see it would be square," insisted Gavin. "That's all I bother to see in it."

"We can make sure it doesn't happen again," answered Bett, "without laying ourselves open like that. Of course they'll be especially sore just now at the smashing of their only gondola, just when they're working hardest and fastest to get the core wall done for their dam. It'll take them days to replace that gondola. They'll have to send clear to the nearest freight yards that can spare a car of just the right kind. And right now I don't believe they'll find one in a week or more. That's their bad luck. It will hold up their work on the dam. But pretty soon they'll cool off. And when no more things like that are done, they'll—"

"You're mistaken," put in Gavin. "They won't have to wait twenty-four hours for a gondola to take the place of the wrecked one. I saw to that. I knew you'd want me to. So I—"

"You—what?" gurgled Bett.

"I sent an order over to No. 4 an hour ago," replied Cole, "for a gondola of our own, of the same type and size and capacity, to be rushed to the Christie camp at double time. We can easily spare one. And I knew it would be your wish, just as much as it's mine."

He paused, eying his employer with some curiosity. The angworm snarl of veins on Bett's temples was swelling. An old white scar on his chin was changing its hue to brown-black. But apart from these old phenomena Bett's visage was as suave and monumentally pleasant as ever. When Wilgus spoke, as he did almost at once, his voice was mellowly sonorous, as was its wont. No tinge of emotion flecked it.

"Quite right," he approved. "Very tactful and graceful and sporting. It was what's known as a 'courteous gesture'—almost a 'magnificent gesture.' Of course I approve. That will do more to make them think we're not responsible for the so-called sabotage you say has been going on than a whole library of apologetic and incriminating letters. It'll be a dandy alibi in print too. Good boy!"

Yes, assuredly, the heat of the day and his interest in Cole's tidings were accountable for the showing of those knotty temple veins and for the darkening of the chin scar. Gavin left the Presence far more at ease than when he had entered it.

FOR a full minute after Cole had gone the giant sat moveless in his desk chair, the aspect of friendly approval still stamped on his cameo face. Then he grunted, "Come in," to a tap at the inner door behind him.

His secretary entered noiselessly—a colorless little parchment-faced ghost of a man who might have been thirty or sixty years old. He hesitated deferentially at the threshold.

"All right, Smeed," vouchsafed Bett. "Coast's clear. What is it?"

"Braden's back here with his report, sir," answered Smeed, his voice as correctly colorless as the rest of him. "Shall I bring him in?"

"No," snapped Bett, a trace of adolescent peevishness in his pleasantly rumbling voice. "He's too late. He's bringing last year's news. I've got his report in advance."

"Pay Braden and tell him I shan't need him and his industrious young associates any more—for a while," Bett continued, adding irrelevantly: "Smeed, if you had a tooth that ached, and if you couldn't spare that tooth just now, wouldn't it be one of your holiest joys to look forward to the day when you could

yank it out and then grind it blissfully between your heel and a stone? Wouldn't it, Smeed?"

"Beg pardon, sir," stammered the secretary, his vacant face blanker than ever.

"OH, NOTHING," returned Bett. "Never mind. It'd take me too long to explain. He's mighty necessary to me for a few weeks longer. He gets more work and harder work and more willing work out of the gangs than anyone I could get hold of at this late hour. But Smeed, when our deal goes through or when we've put Christie definitely out of business, there won't be any special need for him. Any one of a dozen other men can go with it from there. We won't be in a hurry any longer by then, and there'll be no need for conciliation and diplomacy and all that rot. It will be fun to extract the tooth painlessly when that glad day comes. It will be a real luxury to grind it to slivers. There'll be a loud laugh at a good joke that day too,

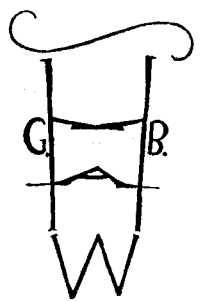
lower valley and serving as a natural retaining wall for three fourths of Christie's proposed ornamental lake, had been the Bett enterprise's chief problem.

For some rods, at one point, the river ran strong and deep against the bottom of the dyke. Here, if anywhere, Christie might be expected to let the water into his own lake bed, shifting the course of the Reginskill and leaving only a dribble to flow on to the Bett dam.

Hence the injunctions wherewith Bett's attorneys had plugged the possible breach in the dyke. But, as Wilgus had said, there was scant danger of Christie's cutting through the dyke until Jeff's own dam should be near enough to completion to warrant the letting in of the water. For days Bett had said no more on the subject, nor had he seemed to remember it. But less than a week after Gavin's discovery of the sabotage tactics Wilgus sent for him in a rush.

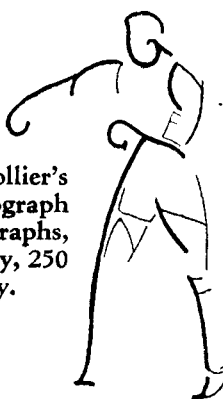
On the office desk was stretched Cole's original rough map of the valley.

NAMEOGRAPHS

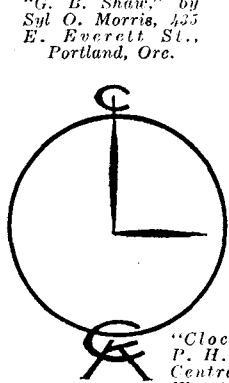


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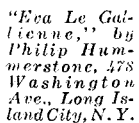
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Smeed. Let's look forward blissfully to it. In the meantime let's try to grin whenever the tooth aches. It's aching worse than usual today. That's all, Smeed. You can go."

The colorless little secretary slipped noiselessly out of the room as usual. But on his visage was at last a glimmer of expression: a trace of worry, bred of a sudden fear his monumentally sane master either had begun to lose his perfect mental poise or else had degenerated into an early morning drinker.

But if Smeed's faith in his deity's perfection wavered, Gavin Cole's did not. Indeed, three days later this faith of Cole's was fanned to fresh intensity by a new proof of Bett's acumen.

The half-moon dyke, running irregularly across the northerly end of the

Again Bett had been decorating it with sprawly pencil marks, this time at a point nearly a mile above the dyke and just within the borders of a patch of his own optioned land.

"If your levels here are accurate," began Wilgus, with no salutation, "we've got Christie's pelt pinned to the barn door. I've just come back from up there. Sure you didn't make any blunder in altitudes and grades, and all that, on this map of yours? In a thing like this it's make or break. So it's well to be sure. Look."

His shapely and overmanicured forefinger fell to tracing the penciled lines he had scrawled.

"Here's the idea," he explained. "Up there (clear above the dyke, you see), the river twists south in that little jig-

gly snake curve. It runs against a high shelf of shale on its south side for sixty-odd yards; then it drops into these zizzy-marked rapids of yours. Rapids always mean a drop of land level, of course. Well, there's another sweet bit of land drop there, to the south, just behind that shelf of shale. In fact, it slopes down to a regular gully, some 150 yards to southward. That gully is maybe 50 feet deep. Maybe deeper. A regular slash a half mile long, running due south and with an average width of something over 200 feet—a glacier scratch, I suppose. Not that that matters. Then, according to your map, the ground to each side of the gully, for nearly the whole distance, is lower than the level of the river bed."

"That's right," assented Cole. "Much of it is a good many feet lower, and of course the whole gully top is below the river-bed level."

"Good!" approved Bett. "Now, if the right quantity of explosive should be rammed into the right number of deep holes drilled in the shelf of shale, just where the river runs against the side of it, the shelf would change all at once into a hollow, or, rather, into a ragged trench that would carry the water along that lower ground till it dropped into the gully. The whole main flow of the river would gush down into the deep trough where the shelf had been, and then it would spread out and pour at last into the gully. By the time the gully was filled there would be still a mighty swad of lowland for it to spread over before it could get back to its regular course. That means the original course of the river would be practically dry at this dry season for perhaps a month or more. Likely much more than a month or even than two months. The time duration would be something for an engineer like yourself to figure out, with allowances for seepage and soil porosity, and so forth. But, anyhow, it would leave the lower river practically empty for a long enough time for any purpose of ours. Hey?"

GAVIN COLE was staring in dumb admiration at his chief. The thing was so utterly simple and yet so inspired.

Even if Christie should finish his core wall and his cofferdam any time within the next few months, his haste would avail him nothing at all. There would be no water to let into his dyke-walled lake. His hurry and his expense and his foresight would have been thrown away.

"There's more to this!" exclaimed Gavin suddenly. "See! Flatrock Brook runs transversely across that corner of the valley beyond the gully. By an easy trench we can turn the flowage into that. It runs through high banks and it empties into Utsayantha Creek, clear over to southward, not into the Reginskill. It can carry off enough of the flowage to keep the Reginskill a mere trickle till Judgment Day."

"Better and better!" chuckled Bett. "All feasible, is it?"

"I'll stake my job on it."

"Yes," agreed Bett dryly, "you will. And a bit more."

"Then," pursued Gavin, "when you've starved Christie out and shown him you can hang on longer than he can, and that his water company can never hope to get a look-in in Reginskill Valley—when our dam is all complete, it'll be a simple thing to stop the hole we tear in the shale shelf and send the river back again along its old course. In fact, this shift will make the work on our dam twice as easy, with no spillway to bother over till the whole thing is complete. We can save cash too by being able to stop this force-draft work and overtime. There won't be any need for such rush as we've been having. We—"

"H'm!" commented Bett. "We can take that part (Continued on page 46)

The Valley Girl

Continued from page 28

up when we come to it. Go up there now to the shale bank and do your figuring. As soon as I get your report I'll put the blast gang to work and have the thing done right away. I don't want Christie to have time to get wind of it and sew us up with a temporary injunction or any such bosh. He's sure to if he guesses what's doing. I'm gambling on his thick-headedness, but it's never well to underestimate a dunce. More good schemes have gone to pot that way than in any other. It's got to be done in a rush, and it's got to be done on the strict quiet. Get busy."

"Of course you know," suggested Cole, "that you're letting yourself in for a lot of damage suits from the people along the line of the Utsayantha and the owners of the land outside of our option belt, whose ground we'll be flooding."

"Don't lose sleep over that," said Bett comfortably. "In the first place they won't know they're being flooded till it's happened. So they can't enjoin us. Then we can keep their damage suits in the air till it's time for us to draw off the water into the Reginskill again. That'll mean we'll only have to pay enough damages to recompense them for the temporary inundating of a stretch of half-worthless ground. No jury will award them anything of importance when they find the water has been drawn away again. It's Jeff Christie I'm bothering about. He can take a leaf out of our own book and enjoin us from turning the course of a stream and because of damage that may be done to some of his near-by land if the river is deflected. But once let us get the shale hole blasted before he finds out, and he can whistle for—"

"As a matter of fact," said Cole suddenly, looking up, worried, from a fresh inspection of the map, "part of that shale—a few yards of it to the east—isn't on our option land at all. It's on a tip of Christie's own home farm—not necessarily where the blast will be, perhaps, but unpleasantly close to it. In case of any miscalculation in the amount of explosives—"

"In case of any miscalculation about the explosives," interposed Bett, "the worthy Ham Gerritt will be looking for a new job as explosives boss. He—"

"That's not fair," argued Cole. "When you're handling shale or any other friable stuff it's impossible to calculate to the few inches or even to the few feet the extent of any blast. You'll look long for a better man than Gerritt."

"When an employer can afford to pay and when he has any judgment and experience at all," contradicted Bett, "he never has to look long for a better man than any man who is working for him, from roustabout to sub boss. Bear that in mind, boy. Now chase up there and go over the ground. Get your report to me as soon as you can."

There was no trace of ill temper or of bluster in the giant's pleasant voice. Yet Gavin Cole carried away from the interview the vaguely uncomfortable impression that he had received a rebuke with a possible warning or threat woven into it.

He did not ponder long over this, for his mind and his enthusiasm were bound up in this latest phase of the Bett-Christie war and in admiration for Wilgus' new move.

Feverishly he went about his task at the shale bank and in the lower ground to the south of it. His earlier figures had been impeccably correct. There was no flaw in Bett's plan to turn the river.

Cole made his report. Wilgus received it with a grunt of approbation and gave his orders.

NEXT day, an hour before sunrise, the blast gang was swarming over the shale shelf like a horde of Lilliputian dentists drilling and filling a Gargantuan tooth.

At sunrise a Reginskill laborer on his way across lots to his day's work at the Christie dam saw what was happening.

He did not understand in the least the portent of the new move. But he reported it to his employer.

For a minute Jeff Christie stood with wrinkled forehead, pondering the possible reasons for such a strange procedure. The shale shelf was far above the tracts where Bett's outlying gangs were employed, and it was still farther from the Bett dam. There seemed no sense in setting blasters to work at that remote point.

Presently, as he stood with shut eyes and puckered brow, the truth flashed in on him.

THE deep blasting of that wall of shale must leave a gap through which the water would pour, even as the gap in the Christie dyke was planned to let the river into his own impromptu lake.

Jeff saw, and he understood what the Bett maneuver must mean. It spelled red ruin to him and to his venture should it go into effect.

He ran to the works telephone, calling up Gusepple, the court town of Preakness County. His call summoned his local attorney from bed. Briefly Jeff outlined his fears, bidding the lawyer secure an immediate injunction and to serve it in person on Bett or on Gavin Cole.

Then Christie looked at his watch. The lawyer must needs wake a magistrate and convene an impromptu court before the writ could be made out. Then he must come to Reginskill to serve it.

All this meant loss of time which could not be spared.

With a start Christie came out of his daze of fear. Hot with battle spirit, he blew shrilly on the whistle he carried.

His campaign was drafted. A half hundred men came running up at the imperious summons. So too did Heather, sensing a command to join his loved master in a walk.

Christie was at the door of his administration shed. As laborer after laborer came racing up to him he sent one back to work and bade another stand by until he had a gang of some twenty-five picked men ready to his hand.

Then he addressed his company, speaking curtly and to the point, telling what he meant to do and bidding all who did not care to risk joining him to return to their tasks. The twenty-five stood grinningly expectant. Christie had shown good knowledge of them when he chose them for this morning's venture.

He stepped into the shed, reappearing with a bundle wrapped in paper. This, in spite of one or two offers to carry it for him, he held carefully under his arm. Then the expedition set forth, headed by the bundle bearer. Nor, hasten as his followers would, were they able to keep up with Jeff's furious pace.

They passed within a quarter mile of the Christie house. Faith, on her way

from the breakfast table, paused to peer out in troubled wonder at the irregular and fast-traveling procession. Far off as they were, she could sense the fierce resolution in the men's gait and gestures.

The only member of the party untinged by this angry grimness of movement and aspect was Heather. Delightedly excited as he realized the controlled ferocity of his human companions, the collie cantered well in the van, barking clangorously, frisking around his master; enjoying every particle of the mysterious occasion's thrill.

Thus they passed out of the troubled girl's sight and into a lane fringed by river-side poplars.

On the shale ridge the blasting gang was working with a military orderliness unmarred by the speed to which Ham Gerritt, their foreman, drove them. The holes were nearly all drilled. Deeply and scientifically they had riddled the slate-like close-packed strata of gray shale.

Hole after hole had then been filled, the charges tamped down with what looked like reckless vehemence. These men, whose life business it was to handle high explosives, shoved the charges deftly into place and with no more outward emotion than if they had been stuffing rat holes with tarred straw.

Gavin Cole stood on a jut of the shelf watching the work. No hole had been drilled within several feet of the boundary line which marked the beginning of Christie's land. It was on this jut of undrilled shale that Cole stood.

He raised his eyes as a collie bark reached him and he saw Heather appear around a bend of river poplars in front of him. The dog was glancing back over his own shoulder. The bark, evidently, was an encouragement to someone behind him. Cole's heart beat fast. If Faith Christie—

Then he saw. Around the bend trooped a body of men striding fast, Jeff Christie in the van.

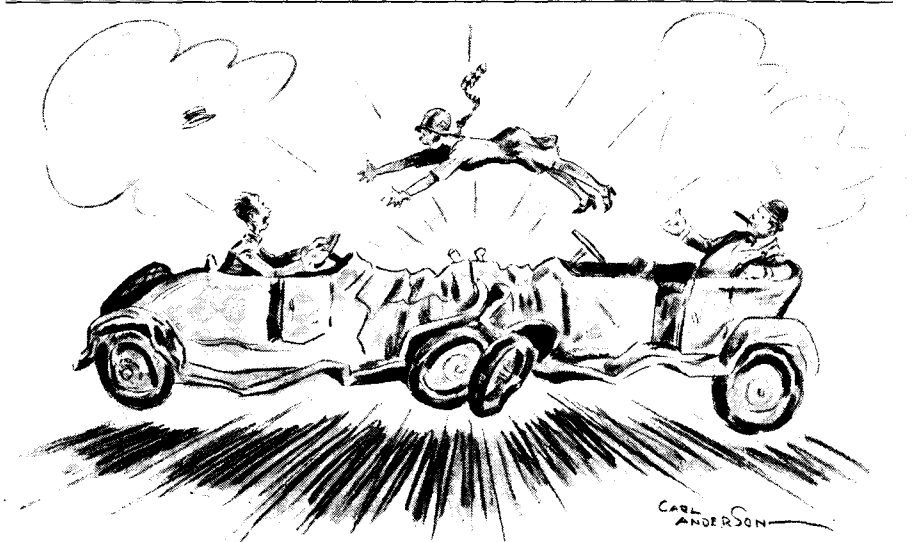
"Stop work!" Cole called across to Gerritt.

THE foreman gave the word. The blasters ceased their frenzied labors. They straightened up gruntingly and began mopping their faces. Gerritt came to where Cole was advancing to meet him.

"What's up?" asked the foreman. "Trouble is up," replied Gavin, pointing toward the hurriedly advancing Christie. "Trouble. In wholesale quantities, I think. These chaps don't look as if they had come here to tell us bedtime stories."

"No," agreed Gerritt placidly after a glance at the grimly lowering oncomers, "they look more as if they aim to put us to sleep without any stories at all. What's the next move, boss?"

(To be continued next week)



Man in Back Seat: "Hullo, Jack! Meet the wife"

The Valley Girl

By



The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, and Wilgus Bett, his employer, are working on a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey against Jeff Christie, who claims to be working a similar plan but Bett says that Christie is working for the water companies.

There is bitter war between the two camps although Cole is in love with Jeff's sister, Faith, though forbidden by Jeff to see her.

Gavin is taking a walk one Sunday up the hill when he sees coming down a track a gondola car full of rock. The brakes have evidently loosened. Gavin jumps up on the car before it is going very fast in order to put on the brakes again, and stop it, only to find that the brakes have been removed. The car gathers speed. Gavin shoots his pistol to warn the people ahead, then grabs a tree branch and drops to the ground while the car forges ahead off the track into the pit at the end which is part of the Christie enterprise.

Gavin's warning had saved the lives of Christie and several of his men but Christie is convinced that Cole is to blame for this piece of sabotage as well as many others which he claims have been perpetrated. Cole convinces him that he knows nothing of this and will investigate. Then he goes off unexpectedly meeting Faith. He is talking to her, trying to renew their friendship when a shot goes whizzing by them. They discover that one of Christie's men fired the shot but Christie has sent him off and fired him.

Cole then goes to Bett to report and the reader is shown that Bett knows and approves of all the sabotage but is deceiving Cole. Cole goes on blindly obeying Bett. Cole and his blasting gang are at work doing some blasting that will imperil Christie's enterprise and further Bett's when Christie and some of his men and Heather, Faith's dog, arrive.

THE blasting gang followed the direction of Gavin Cole's pointing finger. Instantly they bunched together, gripping drills and hammers and rocks and anything else at hand which might serve as an offensive weapon.

They had been told in advance that they might expect hostile interruption of some kind. They had known that they were not paid double to start work at gray dawn and to strain every endeavor to complete this rush job, merely to gratify a whim of Bett's. They knew well that their work was a race with trouble of some nature. That trouble apparently had materialized.

They had lost their frantic race against time. It remained now to repel these invaders and to incapacitate them, if possible, from preventing the completion of the blast job. But the task did not promise to be easy. There was an air to the throng of newcomers that spelt reckless determination.

At Christie's impatient command Heather had ceased his plangent barking and had

dropped back among the clustering men he had been leading so gayly. At another command from Jeff these men halted.

Christie took a forward step, addressing Gavin and ignoring the menace of the close-packed blast gang.

"You have just two minutes to clear your men off that rock," he said, with exaggerated calm. "I advise you to use the time to advantage. I'm not bluffing. Clear them off, and start them back to their camp."

"You don't seem to understand," protested Gavin, unruffled, "that we are on our company's

own option ground. We have a legal right here and—"

"The law is not awake so early in the morning," interrupted Christie, "but I am. Your two minutes are passing, Mr. Cole. Will you order your men off that rock?"

"No," answered Gavin, as though declining regretfully to grant some favor begged by a child. "No, I'm afraid I can't. And, since you are so punctilious about trespass, let me remind you that you and your Falstaff army of rough-neck tramps are on our company's posted land. If I may say so, you must have an uncommonly strong pull with the Board of Pardons to keep such a rabble of habitual criminals at liberty."

Cole had no desire to be flippant. But he yearned to scourge Christie's men to a blind rage which should make them get out of hand. He had entire faith in his own tough blasting gang's power to take care of themselves and to

hold the rock until reinforcements could arrive.

But he did not like at all the deadly quiet of Christie's manner, nor the calm resolution of the men behind Jeff. To him it forecast danger, far more than would a wholesale volley of curses and of rocks. These Christie men were too orderly, too grimly self-contained. They needed unsettling.

To his disappointment his sneering description of them did not shake the group's steadfast aspect.

"I beg you to avert bloodshed by taking advantage of the time I offered you," said Christie earnestly. "That time is all but up. It is your last chance."

"I suppose it must be," assented Cole. "Now, if you've quite done making a monkey of yourself, I'll order my men to go on with their work. This is our wakeful day. We—"

CHRISTIE turned to his waiting followers and addressed them loudly enough for the others to hear.

"You have your instructions," said he. "When I've cleared the rock, you're to run in and clear out those blast holes. Keep your heads. Remember you're handling high explosives. But remember if you handle them the way I told you to, there's no danger. All set?"

He turned back to the puzzled Gavin. "Your last chance, Mr. Cole," he said politely.

Gavin stepped forward among his tensely grouped men.

"So you said before, Mr. Christie," he made answer with equal politeness. "And aren't you rather stretching out a very silly situation? Your good collie is far more formidable than any of those reformatory-alumni scarecrows behind you. It's my 'last chance.' Yes? What then?"

"You are right in saying Heather is more formidable just now than the rest of us," answered Christie. "That's why I let him come along. Heather!"

At the summons the big bronze collie ran up to his master, standing before him in eager expectation. The whole-

sale tenseness of these humans' nerves and tempers was beginning to affect the dog with an elfin exhilaration.

As Christie spoke he shook the paper from a bundle he carried. The paper drifted to the dew-soaked ground. In his hands Jeff held four dynamite cartridges, strapped two-and-two, each pair coupled to a short fuse.

Before the perplexed watchers could grasp his intent Jeff had ignited one of the fuses and had thrust the twin-sticks between the collie's jaws.

Heather, well pleased at his novel burden, shook his head merrily, clamping his teeth down on the explosives and looking up at his master for further orders. The fuse sputtered the fiercer as the motion fanned it.

"Heather," said Christie, pointing to Gavin, and speaking with terrible emphasis, "take it to him. Take it!"

Now this was one of the collie's simplest and favorite accomplishments: the carrying, at command, of any object to some designated human. That the human in the present case was his cherished friend Gavin Cole added zest to the game.

EAGER to show off before so many fascinatedly interested people, Heather pranced proudly to the rock, carrying the fuse-lit dynamite.

Straight toward Gavin, standing among his blasters, sped the dog.

Not one of that blasting gang but was as familiar with dynamite's awesome action and with the precise time duration of fuse lengths as with the contents of his own dinner pail.

Not a man in that danger-inured gang but knew the fuse on those twin cartridges might be expected to burn but a bare ten seconds longer before the dynamite should spread death and mutilation to all within reach of its immeasurable force.

Up the shale bank's steep side scrambled the dog, happily bent on laying this sputtery burden in dramatic playfulness at the feet of his friend Cole.

Several men were between Gavin and himself as the collie started up the bank. But none was between them by the time the collie had bounded to the summit.

There was a universal backward surge of the blasters and of their foreman. They began to leap from the bank at the rear like raindrops rebounding from a



ALBERT PAYSON

TERHUNE

pane. The first of them to touch lower ground started off across country at a clip which would have won him eternal first place among foot-race record holders for any distances at all.

Gavin Cole alone held his ground as the group of blasters broke and ran. Indeed, he took a forward step to meet the rollickingly advancing dog and the death packet Heather was bringing so confidently to him. Cole's voice smashed wrathfully through the looser volume of running feet and of sacred oaths.

"Gerritt!" he yelled. "Get your men back here! There isn't any danger, you yellow fools! Get them back here, Gerritt; if you have to shoot, do it. There's no danger! Don't let Christie's men rush the rock or your work's wasted! Get 'em back!"

Valiantly did the foreman plunge among his scattering men, yanking them by the waistbands or by the hair, to stay their mad flight. But by himself he could not have stemmed the panic rush. It was Gavin who did that.

It is fright nature to glance back to see how closely a pursuing danger is following. Back looked man after man of the blasting gang as he fled. And as each fugitive looked he came to a shambling halt of sheer astonishment.

Gavin, even while he was shouting his furious commands, had met the frolicking collie as Heather reached the rock crest.

Before Heather could lay the sputtering trophy at his feet, Gavin had taken it gently from between the dog's reluctant jaws.

He did not hurl it from him as if seeking the bare chance of putting enough distance between himself and the dynamite to lessen the imminent blast's effects. Instead he stood holding the twin cartridges carelessly in one hand, while he patted Heather and continued to roar commands to the gang to return. He did not so much as glance down at the sticks.

IT WAS this the blasters saw as they looked back in terror. Well did they know that the exploding of those twin cartridges would wreak infinitely more damage than lay latent in their own dynamite volume. The detonation would be certain to explode some or all of the charges already tamped into the shale bank as well as the boxes of still-unused explosives at the side of the bank.

That was why they had run away so crazily. That was why such men as Gerritt had laid hold of struggled like wild beasts to tear free. The multiple explosion must mean certain and horrible death to anyone within many yards of the rock. There had been mere sanity, not cowardice, in the retreat of the wontedly fearless explosive handlers.

But, peering fearfully behind them, as they dashed for safety, unable to re-

sist trying to see how near its close destination the fuse had burned, they beheld Gavin, idly holding the dynamite with one hand while he patted the collie with the other and shouted orders to them to come back. He did not even seek to pinch out the sizzling fuse.

Peering behind them they beheld Gavin idly holding the dynamite

The fuse spat its way right viciously into the cartridges. Nothing happened.

The supreme instant went by flatly—the breath of time after a fuse vanishes and before the detonation. The twin cartridge sticks remained intact. So did Gavin Cole.

"Back here!" he yelled anew. "Man the rock, all of you. They're going to rush it."

He would not have had time for even this rallying call had not Christie's men wasted a moment or two in blinking dully at the man who handled thus an explosive which he must surely believe fatal. His seeming dare-devil pluck held their attention to the neglect of the orders they had received from their chief.

Christie himself was eying Cole with dumb amazement. He could not understand the unexpected rôle Gavin had elected to play in the dynamite drama. It did not seem possible that any sane man would have picked up thus, and held, such an explosive, when its fuse gave warning of immediate destruction to all around.

But only for a moment did bewilderment hold Christie. He called a direction to his men. Casting off their daze, the twenty-five rallied in a body to the work in hand. Up the steep bank they charged to where Gavin Cole stood awaiting them alongside the dog and where the empty rock holes must be plugged with cement and the explosive-filled rock holes must be emptied carefully of their deadly contents.

"The fight has only begun. Wait for the Main Bout of the Evening"

Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON
SCHMIDT



Christie had hoped that the feat of Heather's dynamite rush would clear the rock of its workers and of Gavin as well long enough for his men to surge over it and begin to draw the tamped charges from the holes; then to fight off the possible return attack of the blasters.

It would have been comparatively easy for part of his men, from the summit, to fend off the blasters from remounting the steep bank while the rest should render the drill holes worthless for future use.

Now the element of total surprise was gone. To achieve what they had set out to do it was necessary for Christie and his men to fight: to fight for all they had in them of strength and prowess. Unless they could hold the rock safely until the injunction could be served and until notice of its service should reach Gavin here, their morning's venture must go for less than nothing and the shale shelf's demolition must go on unchecked.

Wherefore, charging in the van of his fast-following men, Christie swarmed up the rock. But a half score of the blasters, under the bellowed commands of Gavin Cole and of Gerritt, already were climbing to their deserted post.

Goaded by the rage that comes of having run away from a nonexistent peril, they flung themselves back on the bank, avid to wipe out the disgrace and to wreak mighty punishment on the enemy who had seen their rout. Others of the fugitives had halted when lack of detonation proved the harmlessness of the dynamite. As rage-scourged as their fellows, they ran back to the fray, snatching up the hammers and drills and rocks and other weapons they had dropped.

If they had been dangerous opponents before, they were doubly reckless now in their hope of redeeming their panic run. In a scattered line they raced for the rock and up it from the side opposite that which Christie's solid-packed gang was scaling.

Jeff Christie was the first man to reach the top. Seeking foothold on the shale surface, still slippery from the night's dew, he leaped for Gavin Cole, who stood calmly awaiting his onslaught.

Gerritt had wheeled back to his superior as he saw the end of the retreat. Now, head down, he ran at Christie from one side.

THE foreman was small and apeline of build. He had not gained and held his ascendancy over his super-tough gang of blasters without a genius for rough-house fighting. This genius he now put into whirlwind practice.

He was a yard nearer Jeff than was Cole. Christie, with the tail of his eye, noted Gerritt's charge and instinctively wheeled to meet it. The two men came together with a breath-expelling shock.

They clinched, stamping the slippery footing for safer balance; tight-enlaced, heaving, panting, snarling.

Then it was that Heather took a hand in the game.

By the time Christie and Ham Gerritt had rushed to their clinch, the collie had flown to the man who thus assailed his adored master. He launched himself upon the writhing Gerritt in a savage spring whose impact knocked both men clean off their insecure balance.

Locked in a right unloving embrace, Christie and the foreman rolled over and over, Heather darting in and seizing any part of Gerritt's anatomy that chanced to whirl past his confused line of vision.

Over the precipitous edge of the rock the clinched combatants rolled down the bumpy side to the softer ground below. Their tangled and struggling bodies collided with the furiously danc-

ing and lunging Heather as they went over the edge, carrying the dog down the steep slope with them.

At the bottom Gerritt landed undermost, his bullet head striking heavily against a stone. The contact stunned him momentarily. As Christie staggered to his feet Heather plunged afresh at the unguarded throat of his master's foe. With a harshly panted word Jeff made him desist.

Then, the collie following excitedly at his heels, Christie began once more to climb the shale shelf, from whose top a babel of strife and blasphemy resounded.

GAVIN had not had time to follow the fortunes of his foreman's bout with the commander of the rival forces. Even as they clinched, the first of Jeff's followers reached the crest and instantly threw himself at Cole.

He was a lanky mountaineer, tall and wiry, but with the average mountaineer's very rudimentary knowledge of boxing and love for close-quarters fighting. Thus he came at Gavin wide open, his outspread arms clutching at the shorter man.

Cole had ample time to gauge the distance and to step in and out again. As he stepped in he hit. The stepping out was a mere formality, for the mountaineer's groping arms had flapped limply to their owner's sides.

The mountaineer himself was spinning backward over the summit's verge, a vacant stare on his lean face. Cole's left fist had caught him prettily in the

stringy throat, just below the chin and in the center of the protuberant Adam's apple. Like Lerner, a few days earlier, the victim had added greatly to the blow's momentum by running into it.

But now a swarm of Christie men were coming over the sides and finding foothold on the summit. Most of them carried wrenches or spanners or cranks or other metal tools which they had been able to snatch up in the brief interval between Christie's summoning them and the time their forced march for the shale shelf had started.

From the far side, in more ragged formation and by twos and threes, the blasters were appearing over the top. For an instant between the two conflicting parties stood Gavin Cole.

Three of Christie's men—the van-guard—rushed him.

Giving ground, Cole ducked under a flailing blow from the foremost and countered with a right to the heart at close range. The blow was delivered with frightful momentum and skill.

Without waiting to note its result, Gavin was out again and meeting the joint attack of the other two. Moving lightly and with bewildering speed and shiftiness, he dived between them, blocking the right swing wherewith the nearer of the pair sought to lay him low. Then, wisely avoiding a clinch, he sidestepped and dropped to his knees to dodge the second man's murderous sweep with a car crank.

The weapon was as awkward as it was lethal. Thus Cole's trained swift-

ness enabled him to miss its full force. It grazed his elbow, numbing his left arm for the instant. But before the crank could be whirled aloft once more Gavin had uppercut its wielder smartly under the point of the jaw, causing the man to rise abruptly on his toes and reel backward dizzily, spitting out broken teeth.

Two more men were at Cole from opposite sides. One of them, in mid-charge, crumpled gawily and collapsed, under a hammer tap on the skull from the nearest of the onrushing blasters.

Then the opposing forces clashed, and there was no longer any scope for science or forethought.

The knotted mass of fighters were close jammed together, with no order or plan of action. They smote and kicked and gouged, using their crude weapons and their heavy boot toes indiscriminately. When two foes were shoved together by surrounding pressure too tightly to get their arms into action, they butted and bit, with hideously defacing results.

IT WAS a free-for-all, with no scope for leadership or for anything else but indiscriminate mayhem. The long-nourished hatred of the rival forces, augmented tenfold by the morning's happenings, was venting itself in primal brute blood lust.

Gavin Cole, in the heart of the swirling and homicidal throng, kept his head, fighting coolly and effectively whenever he could get free use of his often cramped arms. Cannily he ducked and shifted and dodged the random smashes of wrench or bar or hammer that played all about him.

Back across the explosive-riddled top of the shale bank reeled the warriors as the initial charge of Christie's twenty-five men bore the fewer and less concentrated blasters along on its flood tide.

But, trained rough-house warriors as they were, they did not rush blindly into the central scrimmage. All of these late comers possessed too much generalship for that.

A single glance told them their comrades were being driven backward by a thick-jammed body of Christie men. There were far better ways of evening the score than by plunging to their fellows' side of the battle.

One after another they skirted the clumped fighters, gaining the rear of the slow-moving human mass, unnoted by the Christie clan, who were too busy with the adversaries directly in front of them to have eyes or thoughts for any possible flanking party.

These rapidly augmented reinforcements took an artistic joy in attacking from behind, bringing down their drills or hammers or rocks with skilled power upon the heads of their foes.

For a few seconds the Christie contingent were far too much absorbed with the swiftly retreating main body of blasters in front of them to realize that they were between two fires and that from behind their men were being stunned or maimed by deftly wielded stone and metal.

Jeff Christie had leaped into the center of the main fight the instant he had regained the summit after his rolling struggle with Gerritt.

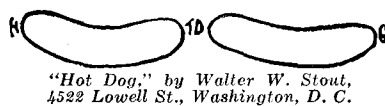
Now, he noted that the pressure of his own men behind him was lessening. He risked a backward glance to learn the cause. His sudden turn of the head served him well. For a rock hammer missed his skull by a hair's breadth, smiting his right shoulder obliquely and bringing him to his knees. As he shrank numbly to one side to avoid a possible second stroke he saw Heather bound ragingly at his assailant's throat.

Then, as the hammer wielder aimed a smash at the (Continued on page 37)

Make a Nameograph



"Shower," by W. H. Taylor, care Mrs. L. M. Blackford, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.

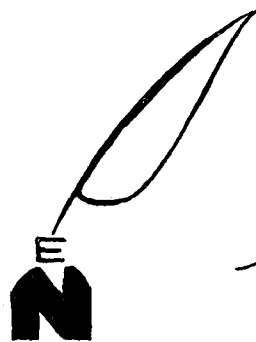


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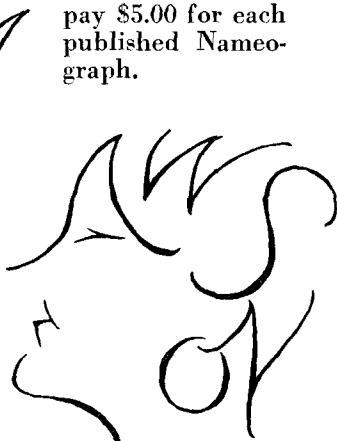


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Take the name of a well-known person or object—or just an ordinary word—spell it out, making the letters into an outline that will depict the word. Then send the result to Collier's, The National Weekly, 250 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. Collier's will pay \$5.00 for each published Nameograph.



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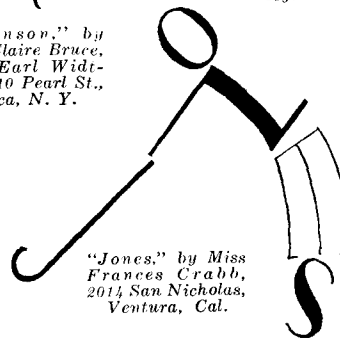
"Swanson," by Miss Claire Bruce, care Earl Wideman, 10 Pearl St., Utica, N. Y.



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"Paul Revere," by T. Bayard Beatty, 109 Poplar Ave., Wayne, Pa.



"Jones," by Miss Frances Crabb, 2014 San Nicholas, Ventura, Cal.

The Valley Girl

Continued from page 26

collie and missed clean the elusive furry catapult, a pistol shot crashed through the din of battle.

Instinctively the fury of warfare was checked to a complete cessation of blows and curses.

To fight murderously with the weapons of one's trade was one thing. To fight with firearms was quite another.

There was a second of lull—a lull queerly deafening after that cacophony of strife. The momentary hush was broken by a man who bored into the suddenly flaccid mass of combatants, flinging one and another aside and shouting furiously:

"Who fired? If it was one of *my* men, he'll wish he had shot himself instead of anyone else. Who fired? Speak up, you rotten swine, whoever you are!"

Ham Gerritt had come to his senses. Still shaky, but craving battle, he had made his way clumsily up the slope, arriving upon the scene of carnage just as the pistol was fired.

At Gerritt's indignant entry into the crowd the component parts of the battle drew asunder, the survivors of each faction clustering together and well apart from their late foes. It was as though every man wished thus to give mute testimony of his own horrified innocence of this breach of rough-house etiquette.

MIDWAY between the rival knots raged Ham Gerritt, demanding luridly to be told who had pulled the trigger and who thus eternally had shamed himself and his fellows. Perhaps through native reticence, no one admitted the guilt.

Nor, as a matter of record, was the pistol user's identity learned, then or later. Some battler on one side or the other had been stung past endurance by rage or pain and had had recourse to the gun in his pocket. The pistol's report had shocked him into sanity, and, unobserved in the press of warring men, he had slipped the weapon back into its hiding place. Nor had the shot found a human target.

It had served its turn by restoring to semi-sanity a mob of blood-craving madmen. Perhaps no lesser agency could have stayed the battle until far more damage should have been wrought on both sides.

"Who fired?" reiterated Gerritt, peering into the blood-streaked and bruised and swollen face of one man after another for possible signs of guilt. "Who fired, I say?"

Gavin Cole emerged from the ruck and came to a stand alongside his foreman.

"It's too late to find out now," he said, still gasping for breath from the mighty exertions of the past few minutes, "and, unless someone was hit by the shot, I'd rather not know. I know it wouldn't be one of *our* boys. That's enough for me. And—"

From among his stricken followers Jeff Christie strode, limping, one eye blacked and a cut on his forehead, whence trickled a thin line of dark blood. Heather trotted beside him, looking up in eagerly wistful sympathy at his master's battered face.

"I'll stake my life no man of *mine* did such a dirty thing!" Christie declared wrathfully. "It's the work of one of your gang of mixed-breed foreigners, Mr. Cole. My men are Americans, all. They don't pull guns on—"

"No?" panted Gavin, his nerves fraying. "I suppose your man Lerner was tossing a ping-pong ball when he opened fire on me from ambush the other day. It couldn't possibly have been a gun he used. You are lucky in having such a high-souled crowd to work for you—almost as lucky as they are in having you for a boss. The water company is luckiest of all."

He turned his back on Jeff and glanced about the shelf-top battlefield. Inured as he was to the rougher aspects of construction-camp life, the scene shocked him.

The table-like summit of shale was slippery with pools of blood. Here and there men huddled in unnatural positions—moveless, temporarily lifeless.

Of those who still could stand, scarce one was unmarked. The faces of some were bashed in to unrecognizableness. Several arms or wrists hung limp and twisted.

A sudden savage revulsion mastered Gavin Cole. Whirling back on Christie, who was binding up the crushed hand of one of his followers, he cried:

"I think you said a while ago that the law wasn't awake yet. So you had a try at taking it into your own hands. What have you gained by doing that? What have *any* of you gained by it? You haven't dislodged us here, and you can't do it in a century. But you've loosed two gangs of men against each other—men who had no personal grudge or enmity: men who were strangers and fellow wage earners. You've sicked them at one another's throats. You've probably caused more than one of them to be maimed for life, if nothing worse.

"And all for what? To drive us, illegally, from work on our own option ground; to drive us from a place where *you* have no rights. Well, you haven't done it! All you've done is to incur charges for malicious trespass and for assault and battery. It was you and your people who made the assault. It was unprovoked. You attacked a body of peaceful men who were earning their living in a law-abiding way and who weren't molesting anyone. That will land you in jail for a nice long term if Mr. Bett decides to press the charges, as I hope he will.

"You grabbed the reins of the law because the law wasn't awake yet. It'll be awake soon enough, don't worry. You're a swell chap to sneer at the law, aren't you, you pitiful would-be ruffian, with your gang of boobs whom you've saddled today with jail sentences?"

"Look at those poor devils on the ground! Look at the swad of broken arms and broken legs and broken heads and ripped ears and tooth-smashed mouths and cut faces and bodies! Pretty sight, isn't it? All your own clever idea too! Your workers ought to worship you after this sample of your inspired leadership."

Half ashamed of his own wordy vehemence, he turned his back again on Christie and fell to taking stock of his men's injuries.

DURING the tirade Jeff had not once ceased from his own task of binding up his follower's injured hand, nor had any gesture or change of expression given token that he had heard a syllable of the tongue-lashing. But his face had gone bone-white under its tan and under its blood streaks. His mouth had compressed to a paper-thin gash.

"Say, boss!" burst out Ham Gerritt, in the loud admiration of his kind for a spinner of fiery rhetoric. "Say! You sure can speechify. If I was half as good at it, I'd be a walking delegate or a big union official this day instead of a measly gang foreman. And I gotta take my lid off to you, besides, on the way you played tag with death a few minutes back when you held on to that dynamite the dog brought you. That sure was some nerve. It—"

Gavin Cole broke in on the praise with a laugh that grated like a rusty file on rustier iron, a laugh which escaped the taint of hysteria only by its roughness and the key wherein it was pitched.

"*That* didn't call for pluck," he rasped, speaking in a tone intended to reach everyone on the rock. "There wasn't any danger, and I knew there wasn't. Christie loves that big collie of his more than he loves almost anything else there is. He wouldn't send Heather to his death that way. He'd sooner lose a leg. Besides, he wouldn't be idiot enough to incur the electric

(Continued on page 38)

The Valley Girl

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chair by dynamiting me and possibly some of you boys too. Not in broad daylight with fifty witnesses. And he and his crowd wouldn't have stayed where they were when the dog started over to me if it had been good dynamite. They'd have broken and run, just as you others did. That's what he would have made them do, anyhow, if he had any knack for staging a thing like this. It was just a part of the whole bungle. It—"

"But, boss, if—"

"So I knew the cartridges were duds," continued Gavin. "Duds. Dead men. Defective cartridges he hadn't been able to use in his blasting and had thrown into a corner somewhere. This morning he fished them out and stuck a live fuse to them and brought them here to scare me out of my wits. I only wonder he didn't pull a cap pistol on me instead, the poor—"

HE CHECKED himself, aware that the strain of the past half hour and the physical clash of battle had had on him an effect not uncommon to men of action. His tongue had been loosed thereby well-nigh to drunkenness. He restrained himself by force from further babblings, and he was filled with self-contempt for his own garrulity at a time when Napoleonic curtness should have been the order of the day.

Jeff Christie's silence, in face of Gavin's invective, shone out brightly by contrast. Cole was aware of a reluctant admiration for Christie, as for a man stronger at heart than himself.

The recent combatants were busily stanching their hurts and those of their comrades. There was no danger, under normal conditions, that the fight would be renewed.

Scarcely more than a minute had passed, even now, since the lucky and innocuous shot had brought the scrimmage to a shambling halt and had changed a carnage-craving rabble into two groups of shamefaced and badly battered day laborers. Yes, the strife spirit was gone. Much provocation would be needed to revive it to even a small degree.

That provocation was no longer at hand, since Cole had realized the silliness of his own windily inflammatory words. More and more was he disgusted at his own intemperate tirade, bred of shock and reaction that had come as a climax to weeks of endless strain and overwork and worry. He did not so much as try to console himself by recalling that far greater men than he have "blown up" on slighter incentive than the jar of the rock-summit battle.

"What's next, boss?" whispered Gerritt. "Do we go ahead with the work? There isn't any too much time to lose, you said last night. Have those guys had enough, so's they won't horn in on us if I put the men back on the job? Or do we have to wait till Christie's crowd is gone? They—"

The question was answered definitely with no help from Cole. A car had stopped at the end of the lane which ran from the country road to the river byway. Two or three men were hustling out of it and toward the rock.

At sight of them Jeff Christie's grim face broke into a grin of pure relief. He advanced to meet the foremost of the trio, a stout man in ill-fitting tweeds. But the tweed-clad man merely nodded at him and pressed on toward Gavin Cole.

All three of the new arrivals were staring about them, goggle-eyed, at the carnage wrought. But the man in tweeds did not pause in his advance, even though his scandalized gaze was everywhere at once. Stopping in front of Gavin, he said:

"Mr. G. Cole? Yes. I know you. I've seen you three or four times at Regin and once down at the Gusepple courthouse. I serve this document on you in due and ancient form, Mr. Cole. A copy of the same injunction has just been served by me on Mr. W. Bett at Regin."

He handed impressively a long and folded slip of paper to Gavin as he spoke. Cole took it and stuck it into the pocket of his torn and bloody shirt without so much as opening it.

He knew well what had been served on him. By a matter of minutes he had lost his fierce race with time.

Now, as he and Bett had feared, Christie's injunction put an end, for the time at least, to all prospect of blasting the shale and letting the river in.

No longer would it be a question of speed and of surprise, but merely of eternally protracted legal squabbles.

Gavin had had the blasting gang on the job as early that morning as the light would serve to enable them to do their ticklish work.

The definite order to begin drilling had been given by Bett only the evening before. Cole had not dared set the men to work under electric flares in the night, for he knew the glare of light in so isolated a spot would draw as many curious valley folk as it would draw moths. Christie would have been warned of what was happening within an hour after the lights could have been switched on.

No, the early morning dash to the rock, with the full gang keyed up to super-speed, had been the one hope. As soon as Gavin had seen Christie approach he guessed that Jeff must have set the machinery in motion for an injunction before relying on brute force.

He saw now why Christie had played for time, first in trying to frighten the workers away from the rock, then in delaying them by the almost equally sensational ruse of a battle royal. Cole's opinion of his adversary's intelligence changed sharply for the better. The seemingly babyish exhibition of force had been planned wisely and calmly as the only possible means for averting the shelf's demolition until the law could intervene.

SMALL wonder that Jeff had made no retort or defense to Cole's furious tirade! The sanity and stark expediency of Christie's action had needed no defense. Even at the outset its justification—in the shape of a fat man in tweeds—was on the way thither.

"You understand the nature of the paper I have just served on you, Mr. Cole?" asked the man in tweeds. "I see you have not looked at it. I beg you

to remember that ignorance of the law is no—"

"Quite," assented Gavin, feeling all at once very old and very sick and very hopeless. "I understand. The work on this shale reef is stopped. If you care to wait here three minutes, you will see the last of us starting back for Regin. It will take that long to collect the tools and our injured."

He gave an order to Ham Gerritt. Then, hesitating and manifestly miserable and ill at ease, he turned toward Jeff, whose jubilant followers were crowding around to congratulate him on his victory.

"Mr. Christie!" called Gavin loudly enough for all to hear. "Just now I made a fool of myself by some noisy things I said to you. I was dead wrong in all of them. I apologize as publicly as I insulted you. I ask your pardon."

Christie had not turned at sound of his name, nor during the voicing of Gavin's shamed apology did Jeff so much as cease from giving low-pitched instructions to the men in tweeds.

GAVIN came to the end of his short speech of amends and looked uncomfortably at the man to whom he had apologized. Christie went on evenly with his instructions, not troubling to favor Gavin with any sign that he had heard or heeded him.

Cole turned away with a mournful shrug.

"Life's such a lot bigger than we poor suckers who have got to live it!" he muttered, half to himself, as Gerritt came back to him from starting the gang on its work of clearing up and de-camping.

"What's that, boss?" asked the foreman.

"Nothing," growled Cole. "In fact, minus nothing. Everything under way?"

"Yes," said Gerritt, adding philosophically, "well, the fight is over, anyhow, and—"

"Over?" snapped Gavin, his sagged shoulders squaring. "You've got another guess. It hasn't even begun. This slapping match was barely the first pork-and-beans prelim that's staged while the audience is finding its seats. Wait for the Main Bout of the Evening, friend. It's coming, all right. It's coming, and it's coming soon!"

(To be continued next week)



"—for myself and wife."

"Suite, sir?"

"I'll say she is! She's perfect!"

The Valley Girl

Faith takes a

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, and Wilgus Bett, his employer, are working on a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey against Jeff Christie, who claims to be working a similar plan—but Bett says that Christie is working for the water companies.

There is bitter war between the two camps although Cole is in love with Jeff's sister, Faith, though forbidden by Jeff to see her.

Gavin is taking a walk one Sunday when he sees coming down a track a runaway gondola car full of rock. He jumps up on the car, but, finding the brakes have been removed, he shoots his pistol to warn the people ahead, and drops to the ground while the car shoots into the pit at the end where Christie's men are working.

Gavin's warning had saved all their lives but Christie is convinced that Cole is to blame for this piece of sabotage as well as many others. Cole indignantly denies this. He is trying to renew his friendship with Faith when one of Christie's men takes a pot shot at him.

Both parties rush plans for damming, but Bett contrives a scheme to deflect the Reginskill River so that Christie will have no water. When Jeff finds this out he leads a gang to meet the blasters, and a free-for-all follows. A shot halts the fight, and then Cole is served with an injunction. The "battle royal" was merely a ruse to gain time for the law to take a hand. "But wait for the Main Bout of the Evening," says Cole.

SOME years earlier, during his first job with a construction gang, Gavin Cole had heard the Voice of Sublime Wisdom. It had issued raucously from the hairy throat of a red-headed and sour-souled chief engineer who was excoriating an alibi seeker among his subordinates. The chief had thundered:

"If ever you win out on some stunt I give you to do, I'll just love to sit here for hours and listen to your explanations on how you put it across. But when you fail out on a stunt I give you to do, just remember your explanations don't interest anybody but your own useless self."

Profiting by this memory, Gavin made no excuses to Bett for his failure to let the Reginskill River out through a gap in the shale bank before an injunction could put an end to the attempt.

Nor, when he entered Bett's presence in the Eagle Hotel, on his way back from the battle field, did he volunteer a syllable of explanation as to his own disreputable and bloody appearance.

Curtly he reported that he had not finished the job and that several of the blasting gang were on their way to the camp hospital.

Then he made as though to leave the office, as Bett did not give immediate reply to his sub's report and as there seemed to Cole there was nothing more worth saying. His employer had sat back nonchalantly, listening. In the giant's broad face there was no shadow of displeasure or of chagrin at the failure.

PLACID, suave, monumental, Bett sat there. Not even the temple veins nor the scar on the chin, this time, registered any possible emotion. A faint hint of amused interest flickered in the corners of his lips.

But as Gavin turned to depart Wilgus broke into a laugh of very genuine merriment.

"Hold on there, boy!" he chuckled. "Don't be in such a hurry. You've made your report, and you've made it as not one man in ten would have done. I give you credit for that. Anyone else would have pulled a hard-luck yarn and given fifty-two fine reasons why the trick wasn't turned. But I want a run

for my money. You say some of the men are hospital cases. You look as if you'd dressed from a ragbag. Your face is bumpier and in more colors than one of your own bas-relief maps. I've paid the piper. Now I'd like to hear the tune. Tinkle away."

Gavin accorded mute tribute to the overlord whose pet plan had just been wrecked and yet who could listen with boyish delight to the fight story which Cole narrated now for his benefit. This time there was no suave stoicism or dearth of comment from the listener. Bett broke in a score of times with excited queries and exclamations. He was as thrilled as a child at its first circus.

He made Cole repeat some parts of the saga over and over and made him amplify other sections of it. His big face alight, he was reveling in every phase of the recital.

Even when, toward its conclusion, Gavin braced himself to relate the needlessly insulting oration he had leveled against Christie and his subsequent comprehension of Jeff's acts and the apology proffered so vainly—even then Bett's face and manner lost none of his rich enjoyment.

Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON
SCHMIDT



Having put his lieutenant out of commission, Faith was leveling the Roman candle at Gerritt himself at almost point-blank range

When the last retold and again retold items of the war story had died into silence, Wilgus Bett had a preoccupied look as if he were casting about in his mind for a question which might win him a repetition of all or part of the narrative. Then, giving up the effort, he declared loudly:

"That was worth the loss of the blasting and the tie-up it means for us. If I could have seen the gorgeous fight, itself, and maybe landed a few good smashes in it, that would have been worth my whole stake here. You field boys are the lucky ones. You're always where the fun is. I have to sit smugly in a silly swivel chair and miss all the ructions. Lord, but your hands are a sight. Just when they were beginning to get over the scraping you got on that gondola ride too. Go and wash up and then have Doc make some local repairs on your anatomy. Send me a bill for your clothes. They're pretty much divided up into small independent republics. I'll make a note to pay for that blasting gang's wrecked clothes and hand them a bonus. They've sure deserved it. Chase!"

"There's one thing," said Gavin, pausing at the threshold—"one thing I'd like to ask. Of course Christie and his crowd could go to prison for what

hand in the battle, but the issue is still in doubt

they did today. I—I ask you won't prosecute. They—"

"Say, son," put in Bett aggrievedly, "when did I do anything to make you think I was a born imbecile? D'you suppose I'm going to make martyrs of those folks? No, sir. It'd be worth a lot to Christie if I'd have him and his sluggers arrested. The case would go before a Preakness County jury of their own neighbors, anyhow. So that's all the good it'd do me. No, give it out that Mr. Bett is sorry for the poor simps who tried to bolster a losing game by rough work and that he won't make Christie's final smash-up any worse by jailing him. Give that out. It'll get to Jeff Christie's ears inside of a day. And it'll hurt him like vitriol in one of his own fight gashes."

So ended the great shale-bank battle, whose story has passed, with Homeric embellishments, into Reginskill Valley history. For days the curious of both sexes made wide-eyed and nudging pilgrimages to the battle field, gloating over blood smears, collecting torn bits of clothing and even knocked-out teeth as souvenirs.

To the camp-hospital shack, for drastic treatment, went several of Ham Gerritt's best blasters. Four of them stayed there for days. Nine of Jeff Christie's twenty-five battlers spent as long a time, or longer, in the Preakness County Hospital at Gusepple. Broken limbs laid up others for months.

Thanks to Wilgus Bett's dictum and to much local political pull on both sides, the law took no cognizance whatever of the affair. By some minor miracle none of the somewhat ghastly wounds proved mortal. Thus there was no urgent call for Jersey justice to intervene.

So far as Gavin Cole could determine, Bett was giving no further thought to his cherished plan to blast the shale and to send the Reginskill out of its old channel. He made no further reference to the frustrated hope on which he had banked so heavily. Again Cole gave mental homage to the man's greatness.

Once, meeting Ham Gerritt on the Regin Main Street, Cole made inquiries as to the hospital-held blasters; then went on to speak of the spoiled scheme. To his amused surprise, Gerritt reddened and fidgeted, presently making lame excuse to close the interview and to scurry away.

Gavin's eyes followed inquisitively the receding little foreman, whose simian body seemed to exude self-conscious uneasiness. Then he concluded that the other sub bosses had been teasing the little chap about the nonsuccess of the shale-bank project or about the initial flight of his supposedly fearless gang and that the subject had become a sore one with Ham.

Whereat Cole dismissed the theme from his own thoughts, only to have it recalled to them in decidedly startling fashion soon thereafter.

FAITH CHRISTIE was driving back home from the Gusepple railroad station in her little runabout. As a rule, Heather drove with her everywhere, sitting proudly on the seat beside her, vastly self-important and happy, as is the way of a motor-loving collie. Woe to the stranger who might approach overclose to the car at such times! Heather was the vehicle's self-constituted guard, eagerly savage in his protection of it and of his mistress.

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

But today Faith rode alone, having shut the indignant Heather in the house before she began her trip to the station. The cause of his home-staying was apparent as the girl started back from Gusepple. Every spare inch of the car unoccupied by her own slight figure was crowded with high-piled and bulky bundles.

Christie had hit on a scheme to hearten his men, among whom a certain brooding glumness had been vaguely noticeable ever since the disastrous fight at the shale bank.

True, Jeff won his point by dint of that battle and had averted the blasting which would have ruined his own fortunes. But not one of the Christie warriors had returned therefrom unmarked, and some of them were still soberly nursing their wounds in the Preakness County Hospital.

Moreover, some of the wildly affronting things shouted that day by Gavin Cole seeped back, with ornate amplifications, to the Christie camp, as did the fact that the hitherto worshiped chief had not replied to them nor defended himself against Cole's turgid accusations.

There was a visible if slight abatement in the gayly loyal zeal wherewith the laborers had tackled their summer's rush job. Men are not at their best when they work for a man in whose powers they are beginning to lose faith. A sudden depression pervaded the camp.

Christie was cut to the heart by his men's change of attitude toward him. Worse, he was worried at the almost imperceptible let-up in the zeal of their forced-draft toil.

So he ordained, for Labor Day night, a jollification at the camp, with sumptuous food and home-talent vaudeville and a singsong. Accompanying this was to be a display of fireworks. Ostensibly the celebration was in honor of the completion of the core wall. In reality it was to buck up the men and try to scatter their new gloom.

A few days before Labor Day Christie received telephoned word, while he was at luncheon, that the ordered consignment of fireworks had arrived at the Gusepple railroad station and that they could not be kept there overnight, as they came under the local ordinance governing inflammables.

It was a busy day at the dam and at the farm. No man could be spared to go across to Gusepple for them. Faith volunteered for the mission.

She drove homeward surrounded by the awkward and bulky consignment which the station agent had uncared and then had packed into the car all around her and which she had some trouble in keeping from tumbling out.

One huge bundle of Roman candles had twice slipped from the seat beside her, tumbling down on the accelerator. A sheaf of rockets toppled dangerously toward a similar fall. It was not a



Gerritt, the alert and resourceful little blast foreman, was taken wholly at a loss by the surprise attack

peaceable nor a pleasant drive.

To shorten the uncomfortable trip, she turned off the main road into the byway which led toward the shale bank, planning there to enter the narrow grass-grown lane which went through the poplar plantation and almost directly to the Christie grounds.

THE runabout advanced with little noise along the byway. At a curve the river was in sight, with the upjutting table of shale alongside it. Faith favored the battle scene with a reminiscent shudder. Then she went as tense as a hunting dog on the point.

Two men were on their hands and knees at the bottom of the bank of shale. Alongside them glittered drills and the like. Two small boxes were beside the drills in front of a pile of freshly drilled shale. The men were at work filling a wide and deep hole with the contents of the boxes.

A few feet away a third and smaller man, squat and sinewy as a monkey, was directing proceedings. Short as he was, he stooped low. His body, like the bodies of the two men he directed, was hidden from view of anyone passing along the state or county highroad or strolling through the fields or along the river. Only from this one point of vantage on the curve of the byway could they be seen with any certainty.

How long the men had been working there, stealthily and fast, drilling wider and deeper the most important of the former blast holes, there was no way for Faith to guess. Yet, from the nature of their present task, the job seemed well-nigh done.

The hole evidently was deep enough and wide enough to contain sufficient explosives to blow the shale bank high in air and to let the river in through the gap to the broad lowlands and gully waiting to receive it.

Even as Faith stared, fascinated, the two men suddenly arose from the filling of the hole and began to tamp their charge. While they worked, the ape-like foreman advanced with a length

of something that looked like a siphon tube.

During the past months of watching the blasts at her brother's dam and at the quarry Faith had learned to recognize such an object as the snakelike thing which Gerritt was preparing to affix to the opening his men had left in the tump.

She knew it vaguely for a "sputter fuse"—a line of fuse inclosed in a length of rubber to guard it from dampness and from other outside action while it is at work.

For a moment the girl sat aghast, motionless. Well did she understand what was going on. Her brother's injunctions had tied Bett hand and foot from tampering further with the wall of shale which kept the river to its course at that spot. Officially Bett could do nothing.

Yet if the shale were blasted away, by persons unknown and undetected at their lawless task, Wilgus doubtless would be clever enough to dodge legal responsibility or penalty for the deed, even while he profited inestimably by it.

Nor, without eternal legal proceedings, could he be forced to put back in place the shattered natural barrier, or rather an artificial barrier which should serve to keep the river within its age-old bounds.

THE trick was clever and well worthy of the man who had ordained it. Nobody save Faith herself could prove that the blast had not been the work of some of the irresponsibly malicious toughs who had poured into the valley on the heels of the labor gangs.

Yet no amateur could have handled the secret task with the science and speed these two men and their foreman were showing. Faith knew that. Also she knew that long before she could get to the nearest telephone in her none-too-rapid little car the explosion must come and the gap be rent through the shale.

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The Valley Girl

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It was a matter now of a bare minute or two before the fuse would be lighted. Then, while the three men should be running for the safety of their car or to the woods, the spark would sizzle its way along the prepared material inside the rubber until it should ignite the explosive.

The ripping open of the shale bank would turn the river into a new channel and would leave Jeff Christie's dam worthless and his labor thrown away.

In the girl's heart hot indignation swirled and a furious resolve that these skulking lawbreakers should not crush her loved brother's life hope and his sole chance to retrieve the fortune he had sunk into his enterprise.

SHE stepped on the accelerator. Planless but flamingly resolute, she dashed forward, leaving the byway and bearing down on the three workers in a car that rocked and swayed and bumped crazily over the uneven meadowland. Gerritt stooped to ignite the sputter fuse he had just placed. An exclamation from one of his two men made him turn his head and then leap to his feet, the match going out, unnoted, by dint of his sudden shift of position.

Bearing down upon him was a fast-driven runabout that lurched and humped along the meadow directly at him and his fellows.

It was driven by a woman in soft white muslin and with a scarlet and determined little face. Nor, as it drew close upon them, did it slacken speed. Instead, when they jumped instinctively to one side, the runabout shifted its direction and charged at the huddled trio.

Convinced that a maniac was chasing them, the three scrambled for safety up the steep shale bank, whence the car could not follow them. At the bank's base, and barely thirty feet from the prepared blast, Faith halted her car and sat frowning up at the men.

Then, and only then, she discovered her mistake.

While the car had been in motion and while the blasters were on foot in front of it in an open space, the advantage had all been hers. She could drive them before her through their fear of being run down. But now the car was at a halt and they were comfortably out of its reach.

Thus the situation had changed in an instant. No longer able to menace them, Faith was merely one unarmed and not overlarge girl at the merciless mercy of three rough men. Ham Gerritt and his two blasters realized the altered conditions as quickly as did she.

The foreman started down the bank toward her, grinning in open amazement.

"Miss," said he, "we're out-of-works from down Paterson way, aiming to get back at Jeff Christie for firing us last month. We got nothing against you. You can back around and be on your way as soon as you please. Get going!"

She did not reply, but sat transfixed, impotent, blazing her mute defiance at the three men as they descended from their hastily mounted perch. Ham Gerritt moved toward the fuse.

"There's due to be a nice little explosion here in a minute," said he. "If you stay where you are, you'll see it fine. But that's liable to be the last thing you ever will see. Best be on your way."

"Leave that alone!" she commanded shrilly as he neared the fuse and as he fumbled afresh in his pocket for a match. "Keep away from it!"

She leaped down from the car and took a step toward the contemptuously amused foreman. At her threatening motion Gerritt's two companions broke into a laugh. One of them strolled roguishly toward her. Ham Gerritt, match in hand, paused with hands on hips, his monkey-like face wrinkled with merriment.

"That'll be best, Raegal," he said. "Get her by the back of the neck and

walk her as far as you can and as fast as you can till I signal you to let go. By that time the both of you will be out of reach of the blow-up. Her car will have to do an airplane stunt all by itself since she won't move it out of the way. It—"

He checked abruptly his speech of command.

As Faith got out of the machine two or three of the bundles were dislodged and came cascading to earth in her wake. One of them burst its string and its paper wrappings as it hit the ground. It was a package of Roman candles, taken from its wooden box by the Gusepple station agent to fit it better into the narrow confines of the car.

A long and plump Roman candle, in its cartridge of pink, rolled at Faith's very feet.

On inspiration she snatched it up and plunged her other hand into the car pocket, where were kept a box of matches for emergency use in the farm garage at night.

Shrinking nimbly aside from Raegal's advance, she struck a match and set the flame against the fuse of the Roman candle.

For a second the fuse sizzled doubtfully. Raegal's unwashed hand reached out again and caught Faith by the nape of the neck. She wrenched free with a jerk and whirled about, the Roman candle leveled.

There was a shower of sparks as she turned. Then, just as she confronted Raegal, who advanced on her with more determination this time, there was a popping sound.

From the shakily pointed mouth of the Roman candle flared a ball of living and lurid fire. It smote the unsuspecting laughing blaster full on his bared and hairy chest.

Directly beneath the throat hollow it smote, a spattering and spitting blob of living fire. Raegal staggered back, howling with pain as he clawed at the living flame that cascaded over his chest and throat and chin.

But he was in no further immediate danger. Faith was leveling her terrifying weapon at Gerritt at almost point-blank range. The usually resourceful little blast foreman was taken wholly at a loss. He had been blinking in dazed unbelief at the sudden bombarding of Raegal, the utter novelty of the surprise attack robbing him of his alert presence of mind.

Now barely had he time to throw up a shielding arm to his face when a candle ball spat his forward-thrust elbow and splashed a goodly amount of its fire on his cap.

Gerritt ducked and ran in at his strange opponent, arm still across his eyes. But he stopped in mid-charge as the fourth fireball landed at the base of his down-bent neck cascading down inside the neckband of his open shirt and spreading over the bare skin of his back.

A TRILLION hornets seemed to have found stinging lodgment between the foreman's shirt and skin from neck to hips.

He broke from cover, cursing sulphurously and trying to pat out the sparks that were igniting the back of his shirt.

In leisurely fashion, Faith turned the pink-cartridged Roman candle at the third and most distant man of the trio. This blaster did not wait for the sizzling cartridge mouth to emit further missiles. He ran. He continued to run with much concentrated energy.

Out of range of any further sizzling projectiles, the men came to a straggling halt; then drew toward one another as for council of war.

Faith did not wait for them to converge for such council.

Even as she put the third of them to flight, she began feverishly to make ready for the next possible move of the campaign. She was more than fairly certain that they would not give up definitely their supreme chance to blast

the shale bank just because a girl had pelted them with a few fireballs.

They would return to the attempt. Unless she could continue to hold them off, her highly original method of dispersing their primal onset would go for nothing.

The two blasters came sheepishly over to Ham Gerritt, who had been the first of the runners to stop. The little foreman, dancing up and down with pain, was rubbing the smoldering back of his shirt against a tree to put out its sparks. The contact of his blistered flesh with the rough tree bark did not improve his hell-cat temper nor soften his language.

He glowered back at his torturer; then he forgot to swear and looked more intently.

Faith had gathered up the remaining Roman candles from the ground and tossed them back into the tonneau. Now she was ripping open a second parcel of them and laying them in a neat row along the running board.

As the men watched, she exhumed from a smaller packet a handful of punk sticks. One of these sticks she lighted, blowing on it and fanning it to make it keep on burning.

Even while she held and fanned the punk with one hand, she reached her other arm into the car and began to tear at the paper on a longer parcel. Under her ripping finger tips the heads of rockets came into view. So did a weighted rotary-emplacement socket, wherein rocket sticks can be fastened at any desired angle.

Gerritt came cautiously toward her, stopping just outside of Roman candle range. With a manifest effort at civility he hailed her.

"Hey, miss!" he demanded. "Don't you know you can get arrested for turning fireworks on folks? It's—"

"Don't you know you can be arrested, all three of you, for blasting where court injunctions forbid you to blast?" she retorted cheerily as she went on with her preparations for standing a siege.

SHE finished making a double line of Roman candles on the running board and opened a third packet of candles, which she placed in the car within easy reach. She laid other punk sticks in readiness and fastened the emplacement socket between two of the metal supports of the lowered car top.

Her arrangements complete, she stepped in front of the running board, the smoking punk in one hand and an enormous Roman candle in the other.

"I am going to stay here," she called to the men. "I shall stay here till dusk. By that time the fireworks can be seen from our house. As soon as they are seen someone will come to investigate. I have enough Roman candles and rockets to hold off a hundred men. None of you can get near enough to that sputter fuse over there to light it without being burned almost to death and certainly blinded. If you think I don't mean it, you can easily find out whether I do or not."

Faith was wholly cool; indeed, she was unnaturally, abnormally cool, obsessed with a coolness which amazed herself. It seemed to her just then the simplest, most everyday thing in the world to make and carry out this unique defense plan for the saving of her brother's life venture.

Balancing herself easily on the dry turf beside the car, she held the second and larger Roman candle poised ready for murderously blinding use. For a space the three men gaped at her, inert and dumb.

Then, as if shaking himself free of a ridiculous nightmare, Ham Gerritt came to life and motion. Long ago he had proved himself a born handler of men as well as an inspired rough-and-tumble fighter. He knew he could rely on his blasters to obey him in all normal crises. To his followers he turned, speaking rapidly.

Then the two set off in opposite directions at right angles to their foreman, walking thus until they were perhaps a hundred yards from him. Gerritt, meantime, cut from a hemlock bush a half dozen limbs and arranged them in thick fan shape before his face and upper body. He could see through the forest of green needles, but the fan would be difficult to penetrate.

Arrived at their posts, the two blasters equipped themselves in similar fashion from some of the evergreen shrubs which cropped up at intervals everywhere in the meadow.

Gerritt whistled. All three advanced at a fast walk directly toward the length of sputter hose which lay idly on the grass in front of the filled blast hole. From three directions they were approaching their goal, but keeping their bough screens between themselves and Faith.

IT WAS toward the fuse they walked, not directly toward the girl, who stood some yards to the right of it. Steadily they moved, their gayly vivid screen fans in comic discord with their smudged raiment and unshaved faces.

Faith picked up a second candle, lighting the two at the smolder-end of the punk stick she had laid to hand. But she did not do this until the three men had come into what she judged to be her range of firing.

The twin candle cartridges sizzled and sputtered as she shook them. Then there was a plop from one candle, followed almost simultaneously by the discharge of a flame ball from the second.

One of the balls flew wide. The second struck true, in the center of Gerritt's hemlock face screen. Faith concentrated the aim of both candles on him. A ball grazed his boot. A second one burst against the thick fan.

"All right, boys!" yelled Gerritt. "It doesn't burn through enough to damage. Go to it!"

He and his companions changed their fast stride to a sprinting run, converging toward the fuse. Before they were half across the intervening stretch of drouth-crisp meadow grass they were wading through a rain of fire.

No longer did Faith aim for their shielded faces and heads. Ball after ball of living flame smote the running legs and the bodies from the chest down. The ensuing ignition of clothing and the eating through of the fire to the flesh beneath were unbearable.

Before the first of the two candles was empty one of the men dropped his screen in agony and ran, screeching, out of range.

Faith did not speed his flight, nor so much as follow it with her eyes. She was playing the remaining candle's last balls impartially on the two others, who had now come momentarily in a line with each other as they made for the fuse. At the same time she reached for another candle and lighted it from the sparks of the one she held.

Gerritt was within six feet of the sputter fuse. The screen no longer shielded the part of his face nearest the girl. A ball scraped the top of his bare head. As he bent to reach the fuse, another ball burst against his left ear, deluging his cheek and neck with its fierce-biting sparks.

He winced, pausing, in his effort to reach and light the fuse, to shift the screen between him and Faith. The shift was not a success. For the boughs making up the fan tumbled from his grasp. This because a ball from one candle had hit his fingers and one from the other had plopped against his hairy wrist. Faith was developing fine marksmanship.

The third man was in full view as Gerritt cringed back. Two fireballs bounced against him, one from his bare elbow, one from the tender flesh of the forearm.

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"Captain, my little boy wants to steer the ship. It'll be all right; he's always been careful of his playthings"

The Valley Girl

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Another general flight, pursued by questing candle balls, carried the men out of range. All of them presented a sorry sight. All were in worse pain than if they had rolled in a hornets' nest.

But Gerritt knew well the value of the secret task he had undertaken this day and the fat bonus which was to be his should he carry it through. He was not minded to abandon a task which at the outset had promised to cause so little trouble or risk.

HIS men too, like himself, were smarting from the jokes of fellow workers at the way the whole doughty blast gang had scattered and fled some days earlier from a dog carrying a brace of dynamite duds. They had no intention of going back to camp defeated, to be laughed out of their highly paid jobs because a slip of girl had chased them with fireworks.

As Faith rearranged her ammunition Gerritt ceased cursing and spoke once more to his men. The girl watched them in unabated vigilance as they disappeared in the direction of the river, some distance downstream from the shale.

A minute or two later they were back in sight again; their garments pouring water from every inch. A wholesale soaking in the Reginskill's deepest pool had rendered the clothes immune, for a time at least, to the effects of Roman-candle fire.

Once more they carried screens of branches, the branches dripping wet. The hands and lower arms were swathed in rags torn from their underclothes and saturated with river water.

At first sight of them, afar off, Faith saw what they had been doing. She paid mental tribute to the simian Gerritt's generalship.

But, on that first glimpse of the soaked and dripping battlers, she herself shifted her plan of attack. Gerritt saw her drop the two Roman candles she held in readiness. He saw her snatch up the sheaf of largest sky-rockets, shaking them loose from their binding and from one another. He saw her plant their sticks in crannies of the car edge and between outcropping rocks on the ground before her.

But, as he wondered what might be her new plan, he noted that none of the rocket heads pointed skyward. All were aimed in nearly the same general direction.

A moment's bewilderment; then Ger-

ritt understood. The bending rockets commanded a sweep of ground perhaps sixty feet in area directly in front of the sputter fuse. Let her set them alight one by one in fast succession and that stretch of meadow would be filled with low-flying projectiles to the height of anywhere from the knee to the neck of the average man.

A recollection of a dog, speared clean through the body by a misdirected rocket—the beast's sides cut away by flame—flashed into the foreman's mind. This he himself had seen at a summer park pyrotechnic display not two years ago. The newspapers had carried an account of it too.

Yet the dog-slaying rocket had had nearly a hundred yards to travel before it found its canine mark. In that distance it had lost some of its initial momentum. At such close range as these rockets of Faith Christie's to the meadow patch, which must be crossed to get to the blast fuse, a rocket might well tear its way through a human body almost as easily as could a bullet.

Gerritt would have given a month's pay to have had a gun with him wherewith to cripple this slender little white-clad Amazon who was nullifying his highly paid task. He yearned to take her by her bronzed column of boyish throat and wring her neck.

His men, less quick to read the new move, looked at Gerritt with wondering impatience as he paused irresolutely, scowling at the serenely waiting girl.

"How about it, boss?" prompted one of them. "Thought up a better idea? It'll have to be darn good if it's better'n the one you just figgered out. Say, our clothes will be getting drier all the time. What are we waiting for?"

GERRITT stared almost pathetically at each of his followers in turn. Their blackened and blistered faces showed no doubt of his ability to steer them to dazzling triumphant victory in this or any other fray.

The dual look stung the little foreman as the fireballs had not been able to. They stung him to fresh resolve and they set his momentarily dazed brain to working afresh.

"You're dead right!" he answered feverishly. "I've 'thought up a better one.' Ten times better. A winner. I was a nitwit not to have thought of it straight off. Boys, we've got her. I tell you we've got her! Listen now, the both of you!"

(To be continued next week)





With the coat over his head, unheeding the Roman candle, he dashed on

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, is working for Wilgus Bett, in what he supposes is a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey. Jeff Christie is working in the same valley—it is his home—for a water company, according to Bett, though Jeff and his sister claim that their scheme is also a land-development idea.

Gavin is in love with Faith Christie but is forbidden to see her by Jeff when Jeff accuses Gavin of working for the water interests.

A terrific war goes on between the two camps with unauthorized, as far as Cole knows, sabotage being perpetrated by his men.

Finally three of Cole's men make an attempt, against an injunction, to set off some dynamite which will let loose the river, doing untold damage to Christie's work and helping Bett's. Faith holds off the men with Roman candles.

FAITH waited in quiet certainty that she had prepared a zone of fire through which the men would not dare to venture. Her nerves were tingling pleasantly. She could not understand this wholly new self of hers. Yet, while the crisis endured, she was oddly elated by that self's novel actions and mentality.

Once more the trio scattered in three widely different directions, Raegal and his companion going out into the meadow, well away from the line of possible rocket fire, Gerritt vanishing toward a lower bend of the river. The line of poplars blotted him from the girl's sight.

A vague uneasiness began to cloud Faith's assurance that she held the

whip hand in the conflict. She could not make out the possible reason for this new move, more especially as the two blasters proceeded to stretch themselves out on the drought-dry meadow grass as if for a long wait.

Faith wondered if Gerritt had posted them there as sentries while he went back to Regin for reinforcements. The idea seemed absurd. Yet she could think of no other solution for his disappearance and for the lack of interest now displayed by his men. Apparently a long wait was indicated. Soon the blasters' carefully drenched clothes must begin to dry.

The courage which can burn clear and high in face of action cannot always endure patiently a spell of grindingly inactive suspense. Faith's nerve began to ravel into nerves.

AFTER two minutes wherein nothing at all happened she decided to investigate. She dared not move far enough away from her base of action to explore the lane or the byway to see if Gerritt were really bound for town.

But from the crest of the shale shelf a short patch of the road into Regin must be visible. Gerritt could hardly have gone beyond that patch in so short a time. Or, if he were lurking among the poplars, she might catch a glimpse of him from that vantage point. Incidentally, she could keep both his satel-

Battling blindly Faith risks her own life and endangers the lives of others

By ALBERT PAYSON
TERHUNE

lites in view and still be within three seconds' descent to the car.

Accordingly she stuck a Roman candle in her belt and took another in her right hand, holding the punk stick with her left. The car stood close alongside the bottom of the shale bank. She got into the machine and stepped on its seat; thence finding foothold in a niche of the bank's steep side.

As she stepped from the car seat to the niche of rock both blasters leaped to their feet, shouting unintelligibly and waving their arms. Apparently she had caught them wholly by surprise, but Faith could not understand why that surprise should be taking such a violent form.

Then, with a final spring, she was on the shelf top—and face to face with Ham Gerritt.

The little foreman had made a wide detour, always out of sight of the car and of the girl who stood so valiantly on guard beside it. Fording the river from below, he had gained the far side of the shelf. Silently as a cat he had swarmed up to its summit, whence another step or two would bring him directly above the car and above the girl who, presumably, still would be standing below with her back to him.

IT WAS arranged that the two blasters were to jump to their feet and begin to run menacingly toward Faith the instant they should see their foreman's singed head appear over the far top of the shelf.

While the girl should be occupied in watching their seemingly murderous rush and preparing to fend it off, it

would be ridiculously easy for the ape-like little Gerritt to drop down the shale bank to the seat of the car in a single leap, thence to catch Faith's arms from behind, pinioning her and holding her thus until the sputter fuse could be ignited.

After that she could take her own choice of staying there to be blown to shreds or she could run for safety. Their part in the business would be done and done effectively. The scheme was excellent. Gerritt did not see how it could fail. Even should Faith turn as he made his downward leap, she would not have time to light any of her ammunition.

Cautiously and swiftly did Gerritt make his detour and his climb.

He caught the ledge top with his sinewy fingers and vaulted up. Then, getting noiselessly to his feet for his dash over the narrow summit, he saw Faith Christie facing him across the platform of shale.

FOR the merest grain of a second did astonishment make Gerritt stop and stare. Then he hurled himself at the girl.

At least he hurled himself where, a moment earlier, she had been gazing in horrified wonder at him. But she had turned an instant before he got into motion. In a bound and a scramble she was down on the seat of the car, and thence jumped to the ground.

The two blasters were clumping toward her from opposite directions, running hard. She paid no heed to them. With a curious numb efficiency she caught the patent emplacement of the giant rocket she had placed in position against the metal props of the lowered car top.

She wrenched it sharply with one hand, jamming the punk against its fuse.

There was no time to spare. Gerritt's silhouette flashed into view against the sky line. Subconsciously Faith twisted the socket piece toward him as he gathered himself for his downward jump.

Followed a roar and a swirl of stinging sparks that dazed the girl. The shock threw her clean off her precarious perch on the seat edge.

To the ground she fell, gathering her feet under her and landing lightly. On the instant she was up again, reaching for a Roman candle to replace the one she had dropped in falling. With this she whirled upon the two blasters who now were almost within arm's reach of her.

But even as she was about to touch the punk to the candle she hesitated. The men were not looking at her. They had ceased to make her the object of their suddenly checked rush. Dumfounded, they were blinking at something behind her and above her head.

Faith realized that they had no further eyes or thoughts, just then, for her. So she turned her dizzily aching head and followed the direction of their horrified gaze.

There, like a shot squirrel, hung Ham

Gerritt, half over the edge of the shale shelf, the upper part of his body limp against the side of the steep slope, his inert arms dangling awkwardly. One shoulder of his shirt was burning.

With a queer numbness of brain Faith Christie said to herself:

"I've killed him. I've killed a human being. I've committed murder. I've killed! That—that means I can't be happy again. It means Horror for always and ever. I've killed a man. I—"

She broke off in her senseless mental iteration. Gerritt groaned raucously. His ape-like body shivered all over and suddenly ceased to be limp. True, his right arm continued to hang in a queerly twisted posture which nature neither intends nor permits. But his other hand was clawing at the slope and his head no longer swung heavy.

He was trying to get back to the top of the shelf. But he had only one hand wherewith to do it. He was dazed and clumsy and all but helpless. The rocket had but grazed his outthrust right shoulder in its roaring and soaring flight. Thus the tough little man was still alive. But the rocket's rough kiss, in passing, had shattered the shoulder bones as though they had been thin icicles.

Up the slope, past Faith and unheeding of her, scrambled the two blasters. They lifted their maimed foreman to the flat summit and with torturingly kind intent they patted out the fire from his shirt shoulder. With the rough skill of men to

"Please!" she begged, half crying. "Can't you see how horribly unhappy I am?"

whom all manner of physical injuries are familiar, they examined his hurt, Gerritt blaspheming luridly the while and heaping on them every epithet he could lay tongue to.

Faith, sick and shuddering, stood beside her car below, trying not to faint and trying not to be agonizingly and actively nauseated. In her heart was a gasping gratitude that Gerritt was not dead or even injured mortally. But she had been through very much more than she could assimilate. Reaction was setting in and setting in hard.

At last she saw Raegal pick up Gerritt bodily and start down the slope on their way back to Regin.

Faith set her teeth. She must stay where she was until relief should come. If necessary, she must stay till dusk should permit her to send up a rocket or two to draw attention to her whereabouts.

THROUGH a hand-breadth vista in the thickest part of the poplars that lined the lane she saw something or somebody move. The motion was swift and was toward her.

Instantly Faith was on guard. Her

sick fatigue and nerve fag were gone. She had cleared aside the carefully planted rockets in order to sit down on the running board. But the Roman candles were at hand, and they needed no emplacements, as did the more cumbersome rockets.

Once more, candle and punk in hand, the girl stood tensely waiting.

GAVIN COLE crossed the littered construction camp yard that straggled between the Bett dam and the ridge road to the south. On a heap of rubbish lay a man sprawled out on his back, dead asleep.

It was a busy day. Drunkenness in work hours was punishable by immediate discharge at the Bett camp, as was the briefest idleness.

Cole crossed over to the sleeper, nudging his ribs with a none too gentle toe. He was McCay, one of Gerritt's most skilled blasters, a man who had been discharged only the day before from the camp hospital, where he had been under treatment since the free fight atop the shale shelf.

Gavin's disgust lessened. McCay was nominally on the sick list and was not supposed to go to work for another day or so.

Hence technically he was within his rights in celebrating his hospital deliverance by getting drunk and then going to sleep in work hours.

Semisanity in the awakened McCay's bulbous face changed to eager entreaty.

"Boss," he croaked, getting groggily to his feet and sagging against a tent pole for support. "Boss, make him take me along. He'll do it if you tell him to. He said I wasn't strong enough yet after that crack I got over the head. But I am too. Sick or well, I can lick either of the guys he's going to take. I fought fine for you that day on the rock. Make him take me. It's fifty dollars' bonus and I sure can use it."

He babbled and hiccuped the appeal half incoherently but with much earnestness. Too drunk to remember the almost military respect due the local commander in chief of the Bett enterprise, McCay was sober enough to plead chokingly with him for the favor he craved.

Cole turned away to leave the man to the sour task of sobering up. But McCay wouldn't have it so.

"Besides," croaked the blaster, "he said it calls for a shut mouth. I c'n keep my mouth shut. Raegal never can. He'll blab about it, first drink he takes, and it'll get to the p'lice. Then what'n 'ell will you people do? It's jail to bust a court injunction. Raegal is due to blab. I'm not. Make Ham Gerritt take me along instead, boss. I got between you and a swad of hard punches that day on the rocks. I got my crack over the bean staving off a smash from you, boss. I need that fifty bad. They'll be starting off any minute now. Ain't any time to waste. They've got to be at the shale bank by three, Ham says, when there's least
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Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT



The Valley Girl

Continued from page 18

likely anyone will be around there. It must be most one o'clock right now. Can't you—?"

Gavin Cole looked at his wrist watch. The hands registered 3:45. His nerves began to tingle.

"Here!" he said sharply. "Come across with the whole yarn, and I'll give you the fifty dollars myself. What are you talking about? Speak up!"

He spoke in the voice used by doctors for the rousing of semidelirious patients. His choice of tone was unfortunate. It pierced momentarily the drink fogs that enwrapped McCay's wontedly alert brain. The blaster's jaw dropped.

"Lord!" he blithered. "You wasn't to be told. I—I—"

He strangled, then broke into a loud and wholly mirth-drained laugh.

"I was just conning you, boss!" he declared. "Just seeing what you'd do. I'm drunk. I—I—why, I was just a-kidding you. And you fell for it. You see, it's this way—"

But Gavin Cole was no longer visible to the hazy view of McCay. Vainly the blaster sought to focus his blurred eyes on the engineer. Cole was a hundred feet away and running.

Outside the guard dormitory stood a motorcycle, left there a few moments earlier by its policeman owner. Gavin commandeered it. Cole could not know the rider had gone inside for a can of gasoline with which to fill his nearly empty fuel tank. Otherwise the engineer might have thought it a saving of time to wait until the tank should be replenished.

Off roared the motorcycle, Cole guiding it by the shortest practicable route toward the distant shale shelf. He could not understand the whole scheme whose salient parts McCay had babbled. But he gathered that Ham Gerritt and Rae-gal and someone else were to have gone by stealth to the shale and that an injunction was to be broken.

Why he himself was not to have been told, he could not imagine, or why Gerritt, unordered, should have planned the trip. Above all, he could not figure why the notoriously stingy little foreman should be paying his two assistants a bonus of fifty dollars apiece—presumably out of Gerritt's own pocket—for whatever they were to do there.

As his cycle whirled into the long lane lined on either side by poplars and thickets two badly burned men farther up the lane caught the whirr of the engine. One of them was carrying a third man in his arms. They slunk into a copse, crouching there as the machine tore past them. Then they emerged and resumed their campward journey at a faster pace.

Midway in the lane the machine coughed consumptively and went out of commission. Cole made a few frantic efforts to set it in motion again. Then, discovering the tank was empty, he deserted the useless motorcycle and set out at a run upon the hundred yards or so which stretched between him and the meadow in front of the shale outcrop.

THROUGH the last barrier of poplars he ran. He emerged into the open, where, just in front of him, arose the thither side of the bank. His practiced eye took in immediately the new-tamped blast and the sputter fuse leading to it. Now he understood. But he looked in vain for the men who had carried through the clandestine job to this climax and who then unaccountably had deserted it.

As he peered bewildered at the fuse he saw the tinder-dry meadow grass in front of it was a-smolder, where the bursting of a Roman candle fireball had ignited it.

Ignorant of the pyrotechnic bombardment, he assumed that the blasters had fired the drought-parched grass in the belief that the sparks must reach the fuse. If so, their hope promised to be justified.

For the curling dry grass was in a

fine smolder. The gentle afternoon breeze was spreading the crawly line of fire steadily toward the outer tip of the thin shell of rubber hose with its protected length of fuse. An inch or so more and the fuse must catch.

Forward stepped Gavin to pull the hose free of its juncture with the waiting blast. He moved fast, for at any instant the nearest grass spark might touch the fuse tip.

HE HAD no eyes nor thought for anything else than the undoing of this lawless work Gerritt had set in train—a job which must cast wide discredit on the Bett enterprise as well as entail stiff legal penalties. Thus he did not so much as note the runabout drawn up close to the shale bank and partly hidden from his direct view by a bulge of the shelf.

Nor did he look to that side at all. After he had balked the dire mischief, it would be time to inspect his surroundings for trace of Gerritt and the others.

Out of the poplar fringe he hastened and straight toward the fuse. At his third step he was aware of a sizzling sound. Then something sun-bright and scalding hot slapped him on the left shoulder as with an indignant fist.

His tweed coat was scorched. A shower of sparks began to burrow into its rough surface. Cole beat out instinctively the mysterious fire from his shoulder. But as he did it a second fireball hit his elbow with another angry impact and a shower of colored sparks.

Then, even as he was shaking and slapping out the fire from his sleeve and as he stared about him in stark bewilderment, he saw.

He saw, at the edge of the rock bulge, a slender little white-clad figure facing him fiercely, while a sputtering Roman candle in one outflung arm vomited sparks and fireballs.

As Cole recognized the girl a ball hissed past his ear. Then Faith shifted her aim, and another grazed his puttees.

"Hold on, there!" he shouted, astounded. "I'm Gavin Cole, Miss Christie. Won't you aim your pretty fireworks in some other direction? If one of them happened to hit my face—"

"One of them will," she returned, her voice high and unsteady, "if you move one step nearer that fuse. I didn't know who you were when I opened fire. But I can't see that it makes any difference whether I am protecting my brother's work from the roustabouts who tried to destroy it or from the man who gave the roustabouts their orders. Please go back the way you came unless you want to be burned very frightfully, as your men were."

As she talked she pointed the sputtering candle to one side and let its remaining contents blaze harmlessly into space. But instantly she caught up another candle and held it ready, with the punk stick close to its tip.

Gavin Cole eyed with slack-jawed amazement the gentle girl who long ago had been his friend and who now seemed turned into a homicidal little fury.

A thousand times in the past few months her face had come unbidden between him and his work. But never had it worn this eerie look of strain and of hysteric resolve that rendered it all but unrecognizable.

He could not make head or tail out of the tragic-ludicrous situation. That Gerritt should have sought to blast the rock in defiance of Bett and of the law and without letting Cole know, was incomprehensible enough. But that Faith Christie should be standing there in the soft afternoon sunshine, blazing at him with a Roman candle, was too fantastic for his dazed perceptions to credit.

Then, through his turmoil of astonishment and his bemused indignation that she should suspect him of having

ordered the blasting, he remembered the sputter fuse. He glanced down at it, fifty feet ahead of him just as an enterprising crackle of grass fire reached it. The fuse tip sputtered. Then it disappeared into the rubber casing.

Invisibly the spark was eating its way along the none too lengthy fuse inside the tubing, straight toward the detonator of the blast.

Gavin Cole's heart went sick within him. Faith was standing not thirty feet from the hose. When the blast should explode she and all her elusively lovable daintiness and youth and vigor would be reduced to nothingness.

Gavin sprang forward. As if she divined his intent to charge, Faith had touched the punk stick to the Roman candle before he was in motion.

He stopped in midrush as the candle was leveled calmly at his face.

"Look!" he yelled, pointing to the tubing. "The fuse hasn't a minute to



Lincoln WRITES HOME

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CARL SANDBURG

In next week's *COLLIER'S*

run. If I don't tear it out, you and the shale will be blown sky-high together. Don't point that fool thing at me, I tell you! I've no wish to be blinded saving your crazy life. Put it down!"

At his savage command Faith glanced momentarily at the fuse, but not long enough to permit him to take advantage of her shift of gaze. She saw the hose lying as it had lain ever since she arrived at the shelf. It was not sputtering or showing the faintest sign of being alight. True, the grass smolder was near the tip of the tubing, but there was no outward symptom that the thing was going to ignite.

She knew almost nothing of sputter fuses, as they had been used little at her brother's dam. She had seen them only once or twice. But she imagined that, like all other fuses, they would burst into spitting and fast-traveling sparks when they were ignited. This hose seemed passively innocuous.

Into her overwrought fancy came the only solution her strained senses could grasp. From a hiding place among the trees Gavin Cole must have watched the failure of his men to carry out the task he had assigned to them. When they were driven off, carrying the crippled Gerritt, he had come forth alone, desperately set on igniting the fuse they had not been able to light. His trembling eagerness to reach it now

was that he might set it afire. His excuses as to her possible danger were framed to throw her off guard and to keep her from driving him from his goal.

A flurry of righteous rage encompassed her at the thought—rage not only at the trickster but at herself. She had tried, with all her loyal might, to believe what her brother and her brother's friends had said of Cole.

Her mentality had been convinced they must be right. But always, down in the depths of her very troubled heart, something had told her, over and over, that there must be some explanation of the whole thing—some explanation which should prove Gavin was in part the clean man she once had learned to like so encompassingly and not the tricky scoundrel his actions and his affiliations had seemed to prove him.

SHE had upbraided herself fifty times for letting Gavin keep such a strange hold on her thoughts, and she had wondered contemptuously at herself for not being able to put him from her memory.

Now, in a flash, her brother was proved triumphantly right. Cole had plotted this evasion of the law in letting the river out through the blast rift in the shale—probably arranging to say that a drought fire in the meadow grass had exploded some forgotten blast left there since the day of the shelf battle. He had lacked the courage to come out into the open and help in the illicit work lest he be recognized. He had hidden so that any possible blame, in case of discovery, might be laid upon his subordinates and that his own skirts might be kept clear.

Then, as a last desperate resort, he had flung away caution and was seeking to complete the destruction from which Faith had driven his men. More, he was seeking his own safety from the Roman candle fire by trying to make her think his only wish was to save her from danger and to undo what Gerritt had sought to do.

The light-swift realization of Gavin's utter villainess cleared her dizzy brain and straightened her wavering arm.

"Stop!" she ordered, her sweet voice taking on a harshness unpleasantly suggestive of a snarling cat. "Stop where you are. Now, turn and walk back, as fast as you can. I—"

"Good Lord!" raged Cole. "Can't you see you're killing yourself? Put down that measly Roman candle and let me get to the fuse. It—"

For answer, as he took a forward step, a fireball plopped past his head, singeing his hair.

"Your face, next time!" she warned him grimly. "Go, please!"

Through all her contempt and fury she was aware of a growing horror lest she chance to injure this man who was her foe and her brother's and who was seeking to wreck the work on which their future hung.

Half of her laboring brain longed to wreak murderous punishment on him and to defend the blast at cost of a dozen lives, if need be. But the other and illogically feminine half of it cried out in anguish of appeal for him.

She had not more than a breath of time to wonder dizzily at this internal war of her nature. For, with a sharp twist, Gavin ripped off his coat and threw it over his head. As he muffled himself thus he plunged forward to the sputter fuse.

A Roman candle ball smote the folds of tweed on his head, setting the fabric a-smolder. Another glanced along the back of the hand wherewith he held the coat in place; and it singed and scored the flesh torturingly.

Unheeding, he dashed on. He reached the hose. With a mighty yank he jerked it free from its fastenings at the mouth of the blast.

He cast it from him aimlessly. The tubing fell at the girl's feet.

She had marked its flight in dazed helplessness. She had fought her good fight. She had lost. She could not take in the meaning of this unforeseen new move of her adversary. Dully she saw an end of the tube strike her foot as it landed on the earth in front of her.

The shock of the fall knocked from the tube end a half inch of snapping fuse.

Faith Christie's gaze was riveted to the sizzling fragment. Now she understood.

She looked up vacantly at Gavin. The man was paying no heed to her even as she was paying no heed to the futilely exploding Roman candle which had dropped from her numbed hand.

Gavin had thrown his smoldering coat on the ground. Now he was stamping out its smolder. Then, still without looking at the girl, he began to put out the string of grass fire which was curling snakily toward the shale.

"Half an inch!" babbled Faith foolishly. "Half an inch. Only half an inch of the fuse was left when you pulled it away. I—"

She ceased. The man did not answer her or look at her. He did not seem to have heard her incoherent murmur. His busy feet continued to extinguish the creeping smolder amid the short grass.

Then he took out and opened his pocketknife—a fat and foreign-made utility instrument containing various tools as well as blades. Kneeling down at the blast hole, he proceeded very coolly to empty its outer edge of its contents.

He cleared away the detonator and the front inch or so of the tremendous explosive behind it. Then, still without speaking or looking at Faith, he vanished around the corner of the shelf, whence the girl could hear his hands splashing in the river.

Presently he returned, carrying a dripping double handful of black river mud. Deftly he slapped this against the blast opening, patting and punching and smoothing it into place, filling completely the mouth of the hole.

When he had finished he spoke to the girl, who had been standing mute and wide-eyed as he worked.

"Tell Christie he'd better send someone up here to draw this charge," he bade her. "If he doesn't, they may try to blast here again. Let a professional explosives man draw it. I don't see any reason for risking my life by working any deeper in the stuff. If you care to, you can tell him I heard about this scheme from a drunken blaster a few minutes ago, and that I came here as quickly as I could to prevent the rotten thing that was being done. You can tell him this was the work of a foreman who has more zeal than sense and who is going to be fired for it and that neither Mr. Bett nor I nor anyone else in authority knew a thing about the dirty plan. Christie won't believe any of that, of course, and neither will you. I'm not interested in either of you believing it. I've said it in justice to Mr. Bett, not to myself. Please understand that."

He turned on his heel and went back to the river. As he knelt at the brink, washing the clinging black mud from his hands—and wincing as the process stung his seared hand with fresh pain—he was aware that Faith had followed him to the water's edge and was standing by his side.

AS HE got to his feet Faith Christie spoke. Her voice was small and timid and not wholly steady:

"Mr. Cole," she began, falteringly, "there—there isn't anything for me to say to you. I—"

"No," he agreed, curt and grouchy, forbidding as he looked down into the swimming dark eyes that seemed three sizes too large for the white little face and whose appeal cried out so pathetically against his stony displeasure. "No. There isn't. Suppose we let it go at that."

He was moving away when her hand fell pleadingly on his arm.

"Please!" she begged, half crying. "Can't you see how horribly unhappy I am and how a—how ashamed I am? You knew I was going to be killed in another few seconds. You warned me. There was time for you to get away. And then you played with death to save me from it. I—I want to tell you something, Gavin—something that can't make so very much difference to you: perhaps it can't make any difference to

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The Valley Girl

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you at all. But I want to say it, please. May I?"

Sulkily he continued to look down at her without answering. The small voice went on, striving for steadiness: "When—when you were making that—that glorious dash to pull away the fuse—the fireballs hit you twice. They—"

"Yes," growled Cole in elephantine sarcasm, "now you speak of it, I believe they did. My coat is a pleasant reminder of your good aim. So is the back of my left hand."

"PLEASE!" she begged again, wincing under his words and his grating voice as though he had sworn at her. "But I want you to know, Gavin, that I didn't mean to. Honestly, I didn't. You have to believe that. I was holding the candle, aimed straight at you, when you threw your coat over your head and rushed at the fuse. And half of me was telling the rest of me you deserved to be set afire and perhaps injured terribly. But the other half of me wouldn't let me do it. That sounds silly, but it isn't. I knew all at once that I couldn't hurt you, no matter what you did. And I dropped the candle, Gavin. But in the little speck of time while I had been trying not to—not to keep from hurting you, two of the fireballs went off. I was holding the candle out straight and I was all dazed, and then I realized all at once as I dropped it—I realized I had hit you in spite of my not meaning to. That doesn't make any sense, does it? But—"

"Not to a thick mind like mine," said Gavin.

"But," she forged on, her effort at voice steadying becoming painful, "but it's true, just the same. And you have to believe it. You *do* believe me, don't you? Tell me you do believe me."

"Frankly," replied Cole, speaking the more roughly as he steeled himself with growing difficulty against the anguish of appeal in her unsteady voice, "frankly, I can't see that it matters. Even if you didn't happen to realize that you were pointing the thing at me and that it was lighted, you surely don't ask me to believe you were thinking of something else when you halted me a moment earlier and told me to go back unless I wanted to be burned, and when you sent the earlier candle shots at me. If it will make you feel any more comfortable, of course, I'm quite ready to believe you did and said the whole thing absent-mindedly while you were wrapped in a sweet reverie of mercy. Suppose we let it go at that? No great harm is done. My coat is an old one, and my hand will be well again in a few days. I'm sorry if I'm not as gracious about it all as I might be. I've been through a rather annoying few seconds, and they haven't left me at my civilest."

He moved away. But once more she followed. The tears had begun to course down her tanned cheeks, and now there was no semblance of steadiness in her choked voice.

"If you had flinched, for even a second or two," she was saying, "it would have been too late. There was only just a wisp of the fuse left. That makes it all the viler of me to—"


"Not at all," the gratingly sullen voice reassured her. "It was my own foolish miscalculation. If I had known that a quick-burning fuse had been used, I wouldn't have wasted so much time in jabbering. I figured I had a half minute on my hands. The only reason I made that melodramatic jump for it was because I was afraid one of your absent-minded fireballs might put my sight out of commission. If it had—I might never have been able to get to the fuse. And I have proved I couldn't induce *you* to believe there was any danger in it. So we'd both have gone to glory."

He ceased speaking, a little ashamed of his own boorishness but glumly resolved not to soften toward this hys-

terical hellcat who now seemed so child-like and appealing.

"Please don't cry," he said gruffly. "There's nothing to cry about. It's all right, I tell you. No harm is done. When you've had time to cool down, you'll realize I am just as much of a blackguard as you've been told I am and you'll be ashamed of yourself for talking to me as if I was human. If you can get home all right, I'm going now. Good-by. Don't forget to tell Christie to have that charge drawn. A thunderstorm might set it off, or someone might get to tampering with it."

He turned away. She took a quick step toward him, catching his blistered hand, and bending over it. Her soft lips touched lightly the burned surface.



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NAMEOGRAPHS

Then she ran, sobbing, back to her car. Dully, expressionlessly, the man stared after her; then down at his own hand.

With a hot intake of breath he strode after her. But instantly he halted. For a moment he stood irresolute, miserable. Then heavily he retraced his way toward the poplar lane and the useless motorcycle he had left there.

As soon as he had trundled the awkward machine to the police dormitory at Regin he hurried to the Eagle Hotel to make his report to Bett and to ask for an authorizing of Gerritt's immediate discharge.

The more Gavin pondered over the blast foreman's astonishing action the less could he understand it. Of course, if Gerritt could do the blasting surreptitiously, the foreman might reasonably expect a big cash reward from Bett. But the chances had been desperate.

Bett must be told of it at once and future misdeeds of the kind be guarded against.

Gavin found himself less able than usual to think consecutively. For, as he sought to concentrate his thoughts, they would scatter in mazy disorder before the memory of a childlike face, tear-streaked, and of a soft touch of lips on his blistered hand.

Strive as he would, Cole could not keep his mind free from Faith, nor his conscience from scourging him for his boorishness toward the penitent and miserably unhappy girl. Most of all would his thoughts center in breathless amazement on that touch of her warm lips to his hand.

Cole ran up the steps of the Eagle Hotel porch and in through a group of idlers to the suite where Wilgus Bett made his field headquarters.

It was a rule of Bett's that any upper employee of his, with anything of importance to discuss, was at liberty, day

or night, to come unannounced into his presence.

But this afternoon Smeed, the private secretary, got up briskly from a chair by the office's outer entrance and barred his way.

The meager little secretary, with his ageless and age-filled parchment face, stood with his back to the shut door and with his hand on its knob as Gavin hurried into the anteroom.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole," said the secretary, his tone as parchmentslike and lifeless as his face—"I'm very sorry, but Mr. Bett is not in just now. He left—"

From somewhere behind the closed glass door came the sound of several men's voices raised in a sudden loud laugh. Loudest among them rang the unmistakable laugh of Wilgus Bett, dominating the lesser cackination.

"Good boy!" boomed Bett's voice, unmistakable again, and distinct. "Now suppose we get back to business."

"Mr. Bett is in conference," proceeded Smeed, unruffled by his employer's inconsiderateness in refuting the secretary's smug statement that he was out. "He posted me here to make certain he should not be disturbed. He—"

"In conference?" repeated Gavin, puzzled at his chief's falling back on this most ancient and most mustily abhorrent of official lies. "In conference with whom? I have some important—"

"With his lawyers and some gentlemen who got here on the 3:46," responded Smeed. "He told me no details. But he told me to see that nobody—nobody—interrupted him until the conference ends. I am sorry, Mr. Cole, but—"

"Oh, all right!" grumbled Gavin. "It was his own business I wanted to see him on. Not mine. Please phone me, over at the camp, as soon as he is at liberty. Tell him it is important."

Two hours later, as Cole was winding up the day's work in his own office tent, Smeed came in.

"I gave Mr. Bett your message, Mr. Cole," said he. "He was sorry not to be able to see you. He has just gone to New York for the night. He won't be back until some time late tomorrow. He instructed me to give you this note."

He handed Gavin an envelope, then stepped back out of the tent.

"What train did Mr. Bett take to town?" asked Cole.

"He went by motor," answered the secretary, "along with some of the gentlemen who were here to see him this afternoon. Good night."

SMEED backed noiselessly out of the radius of the tent's electric light into the dusk of the yard. Gavin took up the envelope and began to tear it open.

Then he remembered that the Gerritt matter ought to be dealt with swiftly and drastically.

Smeed probably would know where Bett planned to put up in New York for the night, so that he might be reached by telephone. Gavin hurried out to overtake the secretary before the latter should pass through the gate of the camp on his way back to Regin.

The electric flare, just above the gateway, illumined the spare little secretary. He had walked fast to reach the entrance so soon. A big motor car was drawn up in the shadows, just outside the gate. Into this Smeed climbed. Someone on the rear seat moved to one side to let the little man sit down. Then the car was in motion.

Gavin had broken into a run. Now he stared annoyed after the receding machine. Just then it passed by a saloon whose door was flung open.

A wide bar of light fell momentarily across the rear seat of the car, revealing for a flash of time the faces of its occupants.

Gavin Cole stopped short in his pursuit, peering incredulously after the receding car. Slack-jawed, dumfounded, he stood there.

(To be continued next week)

The Valley Girl

By
ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, is working for Wilgus Bett, in what he supposes is a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey. Jeff Christie is working in the same valley—it is his home—for a water company, according to Bett, though Jeff and his sister claim that their scheme is also a land-development idea.

Gavin is in love with Faith Christie but is forbidden to see her by Jeff when Jeff accuses Gavin of working for the water interests.

A terrific war goes on between the two camps with unauthorized, as far as Cole knows, sabotage being perpetrated by his men.

Finally three of Cole's men make an attempt, against an injunction, to set off some dynamite which will let loose the river, doing untold damage to Christie's work and helping Bett's. Faith tries to hold off the men with Roman candles. The leader is badly burned.

Gavin discovers what is happening, rushes to the spot after the men have gone, and despite Faith's fireworks, pulls the fuse from the dynamite.

Faith, realizing at last that Gavin had nothing to do with this plot, is horror-struck at the thought that she nearly killed him. She tries unsuccessfully to convince him.

Gavin goes to report this new outrageous sabotage to Bett, but Bett is in conference. Gavin goes to his office tent and there Smeed, Bett's secretary, arriving by car, hands him a note from Bett and says that Bett has left for New York.

THE glint of lamplight had fallen athwart the faces of the two occupants of the motor car's rear seat for the merest instant. Yet it had been long enough and strong enough to show Gavin the severely correct and deferential parchment face of the secretary, Smeed.

Also it had brought out from the surrounding dusk every classic feature of Wilgus Bett.

Bett! Smeed said the giant had gone to town by motor, along with some of the men with whom he had been in conference at the Eagle Hotel, that afternoon. Yet here he had been just now, sitting in the shadows outside the camp gate waiting for his secretary to return from giving Bett's own letter to Cole!

Surely it would have been ten times simpler and shorter for Bett to have telephoned such a message or even to have driven to the office tent door himself and to have delivered it there by word of mouth. The whole thing was foreign to Wilgus Bett's breezy directness. It did not make sense.

Sore perplexed, Gavin made his way to his own cheerless quarters at the Eagle Hotel and to the uninspiring evening meal which awaited him there.

For the first time in all their association Bett had refused to see him. For some seemingly good reason, Smeed

had seen fit to lie to him about the overlord's whereabouts. Bett had sent his secretary to deliver a note, when, by driving a hundred yards farther, he could have spoken to Cole in person.

Bett, who kept his fingers on every pulse of the big enterprise, had not so much as taken the trouble to find what important thing Cole had wanted to see him about, though well he must have known Gavin would not have left such a message if the matter had been trivial.

GAVIN arrived at the hotel and was passing abstractedly across the lobby toward the stairs when the hotel proprietor chanced to meet him.

"Evening, Mr. Cole," hailed the hotel keeper. "Too bad about those smashed-up men of yours today. You'd think that gang would have had their fill of trouble without—"

"What men?" asked Gavin. "What happened?"

No injury report had reached him, and he imagined the hotel keeper had got hold of one of the countless wild accident rumors that forever are afloat in a construction-job town.

"Why, your blast foreman, Gerritt, of course," answered the proprietor—"he and a couple of his men. I don't know the two men's names. They were blown up pretty bad, I hear, by a premature blast somewhere around the dam. Gerritt's in the hospital, my boy tells me. He saw him being carried in there. The other two had some ugly burns. They got treated by one of the doctors and went back to their own quarters. Too bad! But I suppose folks who handle blasts—"

"Yes," agreed Gavin vaguely. "I suppose so."

He passed on, wondering bewilderedly

*Faith and her loyal
collie engineer a
gallant rescue and
love shines through
the dark clouds*

why no word of the mishap had been brought to his office at the camp. He began to feel the irritation which encompasses a man who finds himself the only person who has not been let in on some joke. He resolved to go up to the hospital, as soon as he had eaten, to interview Gerritt and to demand from the hospital superintendent and of his own assistants why a full report of the accident had not been made to him.

Gavin reached his own bare room and switched on the light. Then he noted for the first time he still was holding Wilgus Bett's unopened letter. He tore the envelope and read:

Dear Cole:

Here is where I am giving you a day's work you'll enjoy. You told me once about a zinc mine shaft you've heard is somewhere on the near side of Durkin Hill. (You were on the way there, I think you said, when you got mixed up with that runaway gondola car.)

Well, a syndicate is hooked, and pretty nearly landed, on the metal possibilities in these Reginskill hills. I've been in conference with two of its members all this afternoon. I happened to tell them about this zinc thing. Perhaps I laid it on a trifle strong.

Anyhow, they jumped at it. One of them had read, in some old mine treatise, that the most valuable zinc traces in the Middle Atlantic states had been found in a prospect shaft up among these hills a century or more ago. That must be the same place. He wanted to get a full report on it. I didn't have the nerve to tell him I didn't even know where the measly thing is. So I stalled him for a couple of days. I told

him we'd lead his experts there by the end of that time.

It would mean a lot to us and to this valley. So I want you to drop everything and start out at dawn tomorrow and look for that prospect shaft. You're the only person hereabouts who has any faintest dope as to where it is, if it exists at all. It will mean more to us just now than anything else. Take the entire day if you have to, and the next day too.

But FIND it.

You're the only one who can help me out in this. If I have to tell that mining crowd that I've strung them along on a hoax, it won't help us overmuch in making them invest here. I'm relying on you, boy. I never yet relied on you in vain. Go to it! As ever, W. BETT.

No word as to the mysterious lies of Smeed or as to (Continued on page 46)



*From behind them
belched a swirl of
grayish dust*

Illustrated
by HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT

The Valley Girl

Continued from page 22

Bett's reason for sitting hidden in the car while the secretary delivered the note. Yet the command, bizarre as it was, seemed quite in keeping with Bett's way of doing things. The more bizarre his orders, as a rule, the more common sense and necessity there was likely to be behind them.

With a sigh Gavin gave up the tangle of incomprehensible happenings. He was dead tired. He was due to start before sunrise on his systematic quartering of Durkin Hill, above the Christie quarry, in quest of that possibly apocryphal mine shaft of pre-Revolutionary days.

He was due to have need for all his vigorous strength for the day of stiff quartering of the mountain side. So, giving up his plan of visiting the hospital, he ate his ill-cooked dinner and went to bed. Gerritt and the others could wait until his return from shaft seeking.

AT GRAY dawn Cole was awake and up. After an ice-chill shower and a rubdown he shaved and got into his clothes and a pair of stout boots. Then, after a hurried breakfast, he pocketed two lunch sandwiches and set out on his questing.

A heavy night's sleep, and the prospect of a whole day's absence from the straining racket and rush of the labor gangs and of the myriad teasing details of his routine, made him oddly exhilarated. It would be good to get away from every duty and every associate and to think things out. Also, in the freshness of early morning there seemed fewer and less complicated things to think out.

Gayly he crossed the meadow and the hand bridge over the Reginskill and made his way toward the steep and thick-wooded mountain side beyond. From here he could see depressions in the hillside trees where, at two points, rudimentary wood roads wound their serpentine course up the slope.

These roads were old, for assuredly timber had not been gathered here and carted to the valley since the scrubby second growth had begun to clothe the mountain side. There were only a handful of the ancient trees left standing after the prodigal deforestation ordained by some spendthrift of many years ago.

Tree cutters, game hogs, water grabbers—this unholy trinity was doing its industrious best, as ever, to ruin nature's work.

One or both the antique and overgrown wood roads, reflected Gavin, in all probability had been there in the days when the colonial landowner found his zinc prospect and set his lazy Negro slaves to digging its slanting shaft into the heart of the hillside.

The landowner would have been likeliest to cut some kind of practical trail, if one did not exist already, for the proposed transporting of his ore and of such rudimentary machinery as he might have used in the shaft-sinking. What more natural than that one of these ancient roads was of his cutting and had been kept open later for the drawing of wood?

By exploring both roads in succession from base to top of Durkin Hill, and by penetrating the undergrowth on either side, there was more chance of coming upon traces leading to the shaft than by a mere quartering of the entire mountain side.

Accordingly Gavin struck off toward the beginning of the nearer road as well as he could determine its location amid the billowings of the foothills and knolls at the slope's base.

As Cole came to the first upward turn in the wood road there was a patter of feet from somewhere in front of him. Then around the curve trotted a huge bronze-and-snow collie.

Heather, returning homeward from an early morning rabbit hunt on the mountain, had caught sound and scent of his good friend Gavin and had quickened his wolf trot, flattening back his

tulip ears against his head; his deep-set eyes glinting with gay anticipation.

For be it known that a collie finds it only moderately interesting, as a rule, to fare forth on solitary rambles. The jaunt begins to pall before very long. But there is no normal collie that does not love to go on the longest and most tiring walk in any weather if only he may have some human he likes as a walking companion. This craving of the average dog to go walking with humans is one of the strongest and most inexplicable of all canine traits.

Heather was genuinely fond of Cole. Indeed, Gavin was almost the only person, save only his adored mistress and master, for whom the big collie felt the remotest affection. Thus, finding his two-legged friend abroad so early, Heather rushed up to him, barking and capering and patting at Cole's legs with flying white forepaws.

Gavin stooped and caressed the enthusiastically welcoming dog; then the two mounted the wood road, side by side.

For some minutes Gavin plodded along, his eyes piercing the thickets at either hand for likely spots where once a mine shaft might have been sunk. Heather walked sometimes beside him, sometimes lagged behind to investigate some possible squirrel hole; sometimes gamboled ahead as if to show his comrade the way.

Then, some yards beyond, a grayish and shapeless thing scuttled across the wood road. Head down, Heather gave chase. It was not every day that a woodchuck came within his ken. Like a furry bronze thunderbolt he sped after his prey.

The woodchuck ambled at the top of his rocking-horse speed into the roadside bushes. Heather drove him out of them and along a rock ledge with a low cliff rising from it. At the edge of a flat tangle of undergrowth, midway on this ledge, the woodchuck took cover, burrowing into the clump of twisted bushes and creepers a bare eighteen inches ahead of the pursuing collie.

Gavin, looking on amusedly from the road, waited to hear the sounds of violent conflict from among the thin barrier of undergrowth plastered against the cliff. But no such sound emerged.

A second later, however, he heard Heather break into a fanfare of harrowing barks such as a collie emits only when he has treed or holed his prey. Apparently the woodchuck had found a hole in the cliff's face, where he was safe from his enemy.

Gavin advanced lazily, parting the screen of bushes. Then he caught his breath. In front of him was what he sought.

From low down the cliff to the ledge itself yawned an aperture in the rock. In front of it, among the undergrowth, were heaps of stone and rubble, covered with vines.

In the center of the shaft opening danced Heather, smelling and scratch-

ing at a narrow gap of rock to one side of the hole. Here evidently the woodchuck had found shelter.

Gavin brushed the excited dog aside and began to rip down and throw away the leafage which masked the shaft entrance. The hole was perhaps four feet high and six wide. Little as he knew of practical mining, Gavin could see the work had been done in slipshod, amateur fashion.

He could visualize the colonial landowner, with far more theory than practice, bunglingly directing the still more bungling efforts of his Negro diggers and blasters as they deepened the shaft.

Taking out the flashlight and canvas bag and geologist's hammer he so optimistically had brought along, Cole prepared to descend the steeply sloping shaft. The way was narrow and narrower. It was rough and was slippery from damp. The shoring had been crudely insufficient. Decades ago it had rotted to punk and had fallen to the precipitous floor. Walls and roof were oozing.

Juts and big stones above him made the man dodge and crawl as he made his careful descent. He ducked lower, on hands and knees, to crawl under an overhanging boulder that the Negroes had dug under and around. Then for a step or so the reef was a little higher. Cole sat up and turned his light ahead, toward the shaft bottom. The bottom was but a few yards beyond. There a black pool of water reflected his light's gleam.

"Well," mused Gavin, "I've found it. Two days to find it in, and I blundered on it in less than an hour. Not so bad."

He drew forth again the tiny hammer and chisel he had brought and fell to chipping specimens of rock from the walls on both sides, dumping them into the canvas sack. He chose his specimens at random from where he sat clear down to the water's edge. Then he began his ascent, still chipping and collecting.

AS HE stooped low to crawl under the down-jutting boulder, halfway to the mouth of the shaft, his foot slipped on a slimy stone. He threw both arms out instinctively to recover his balance. His palm smote smartly against the boulder.

As if it had been suspended by a hair and on greased grooves, the big rock slid down from the earthy ceiling where the decay of the shoring had left it unbraced. With no undue noise or dirt shower, it fell to the floor of the shaft.

Instead of rolling down to the bottom—sweeping the helpless Gavin along in its bouncing flight—the boulder stopped where it fell. The drop had been only a few feet. Yet that distance and the weight had sufficed to drive the sharp jut of the boulder into the hard-trodden patch of earth just beneath it.

There stood the great stone, blocking most of the narrow shaft, completely barring Gavin Cole from getting out.

Yes, he was a prisoner. Study of the rock's position from every angle proved that. He was bottled as securely in this slimy prospect shaft as though he were sealed in the Mamertine dungeons.

He crouched there, confused, awed. From above trickled faint light from the glowing red sunrise. From above, too, came the renewed merry barking of Heather as the collie ceased for a brief breathing space and resumed his onslaught on the coyly invisible woodchuck.

Recklessly Gavin put all his strength into an effort to stir the stone from its imbedded point, so that it might topple to the right and give him the advantage of those extra few inches. Through the left-hand opening he knew he could writhe his way sideways if a few more inches were added to its width. It was well worth while to risk a crushing if only he could dislodge the rock and gain that one off chance of life. But he could not stir the boulder, strive and heave as he would. Nor could his knife's largest blade make any impression on the rock of the left-hand wall, alongside the fallen stone.

The only result of this cutting maneuver was to make his knife close sharply as he bore more force upon it. It closed on the inside of his forefinger, gashing the flesh nastily. Gavin exclaimed in petty vexation at his own awkwardness.

The exclamation must have held a subtle undernote of something more than mere annoyance. For at sound of it, in a momentary interval between thunderous barks at the woodchuck, Heather desisted suddenly from his vain effort to spur the ground hog into coming forth to be slain.

The collie looked worriedly into the shaft. Then, on mincing white feet, he came slowly down to see what had befallen his human chum.

As he reached the boulder the great dog appeared to sense something of the man's plight. He paused, trembling all over and whining softly, far down in his shaggy throat. Then he sniffed at the boulder and thrust his head hesitatingly through the broader left-hand opening toward the imprisoned Gavin.

"Heather!" gasped Cole in sharp relief. "Oh, Heather, old chap, what a fool I was! I clean forgot *you*. Wait a second. Let me think."

He spoke as to a fellow human. The dog stood waiting, as though he understood. His recent puppylike friskiness was gone. Majestic, solemn, alert, he waited.

"I sent a note to her once by you," mused Gavin, half aloud. "I—"

He searched his clothes. There was no scrap of paper in them, nor a pencil stub. Through every pocket he hunted. In the right hip pocket of his trousers was a crumpled wad of something.

He pulled it out. It was the handkerchief he had thrust there, wet, the day before—the blue-initialed handkerchief which once had served as collar for Heather.

Faith Christie must know that handkerchief the instant she should set eyes on it. It was almost as good as a note would be—if only Heather could be relied on, in this time of grim peril, to enact the trick he so often had performed for his owner's mere amusement.

GAVIN clenched the handkerchief in his convulsively shut hand and prayed.

Then, preternaturally calm, he reached forward, calling the dog to him. Again Heather thrust his head through the small aperture. With unshaking fingers Gavin Cole bound the handkerchief firmly to his collar.

"Heather!" he commanded, his voice sounding flat and queer in that low-vaulted chamber of horrors. "Heather! Take it to Mistress! To Mistress, Heather! Take it. *Quick!*"

The last word was almost a cry as the collie hesitated, unwilling to desert his human pal in dire need. But the timbre of the exclamation went through Heather's sensitive consciousness like a breath of fire.

The dog backed out of the slot between rock wall and boulder and scrambled up the steep incline to the top.

"Take it to Mistress, Heather!" came Gavin's echo-distorted voice up the shaft. "*Quick!*"

The collie sped down the mountain side, no longer seeking the easier going of the road, but traveling as the crow is supposed to fly in direct line, over windfall and rock and through thicket and gully. His mighty muscles were strained to his headlong flight.

He shot through copse and thicket; he vaulted brooks; he took saggly overgrown woodland fences in his stride. Then he was on the fairly level ground of the meadow. Like a coursing greyhound, stomach to earth, he swept across it, the handkerchief flapping in the wind.

Heather knew something about that handkerchief which Gavin Cole in his excitement and in the shaft's gloom had not observed. The dog's sense of smell told him the fabric reeked of fresh blood.

During the half-minute that Cole had gripped the handkerchief in his newly gashed hand, the fast-flowing blood from a severed small vein had drenched through and through it. While he was tying it to Heather's collar, more blood from the cut finger had soaked into it. The handkerchief was a ghastly sight, with its variegated pattern of scarlet.

FAITH CHRISTIE had not slept. Her mind and her heart were too achingly full for slumber. On the preceding night she had sought out her brother in his study. He and she had talked for hours. Dawn filtered into her bedroom window, finding her wide-eyed and wakeful.

She arose and bathed and dressed and went out into the sunrise. Breakfast would not be ready for another hour. The day, for all its early coolness, promised to be hot.

On Faith's desk lay a letter she had written, long after midnight, to Gavin Cole.

It occurred to her now to get into her runabout and drive in to Regin, there to post it in time for the first morning delivery. She was cravingly eager that he get it at once. She might even stop at the Eagle Hotel and ask that it be delivered to him by hand.

Accordingly, taking along the thick letter, she went to the garage and got out her little car. As she drove it toward the main road something crashed through the privet hedge bordering the driveway and hurled itself at the moving car.

In one great bound Heather cleared the top of the low door and landed in spread-eagle fashion, half on the seat, half in his mistress's lap.

Faith brought the car to a jarring halt and stared in astonishment at her deliriously excited collie. Then, as her eyes focused on the wriggling and barking and whining and panting dog, she saw the flutter of red and white dangling from his collar.

She reached out, as revolted as she was amazed at the gruesome rag. Her fingers touched a corner of it which was emblazoned by initials in bright blue.

Faith sat thunderstruck, looking at the initials and then at the blood which soaked the handkerchief. Her inaction did not at all suit Heather. The collie bounded again from the car, trotting back a little way along the route by which he had come; then stopping and barking a peremptory summons back to her.

Before she realized what she was doing, Faith had the car in motion and was driving toward him. At her advance, Heather ran for another few hundred feet, turning again to bark his frenzied command. And across the meadow the car pursued him.

Faith was minded to get out and follow the eager dog on foot. Then she decided against it. She could not hope to keep up with Heather or indeed with in sight of him, were she to walk. The stout little car was making fair speed as she guided it between the rocks and the worst inequalities of ground.

She could make far better speed—and assuredly speed was needed—was needed to the utmost—by driving as far along the dog's unknown route as a car

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The Valley Girl

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could travel. It would be time enough after that to make what breakneck pace she could on foot.

Thus, the collie leading and ever stopping to bark encouragement, the swaying and sadly bumped runabout came at last to the wood road at the mountain base. For some reason, or for no reason, Heather did not continue now along his former die-straight course. Perhaps he sensed that the car could not clear brooks and undergrowth as could he. For he mounted the wood road.

At first speed the car chugged upward behind him, coughing and presently boiling. Up and upward it went, Heather racing back at every curve that hid it from his view to bark impatient encouragement.

Then, at a steep upward pitch, the engine refused its task. By the time it stopped Faith was out of the car and was running up the precipitous wood road after the collie.

She had not far to travel thus. In another fifty yards Heather left the trail and bounded along a rock ledge to its left. Some rods along this ledge he came again to a halt. This time he did not bark, nor so much as turn back to look at his mistress. He vanished into the side of the ledge. His work was done, the gallant work of a gallant dog of a gallant breed.

Gavin Cole roused himself from a half stupor at sound of pattering feet above him. To the man it seemed he had been lying for many hours in his grave of rock. Between himself and the light, as he peered around the boulder, he saw the silhouette of the huge collie.

He saw too, with sick constriction of his heart, that the handkerchief dangled still from the dog's furry throat. Evidently Heather had cruised about aimlessly, and had come back at last to revisit the stricken man.

"To blazes with this slop talk about the marvelous brain and loyalty of collies!" snarled Cole in a gust of hot rage at the smashing of his last hope for life. "Nature-faking lies, all of it! I—"

The cave entrance was darkened by a second silhouette—a figure wondrously dainty and graceful and lightly poised.

"Faith!" he croaked, dizzily. "*Faith!*" She heard, and she hurried down the slimy incline toward him, crying out in keen distress as she saw the boulder between them.

"Don't be frightened," he soothed her. "It's all right. If I can bother you to get back to the nearest house and telephone to my assistant to rush a wrecking crew here, they'll tunnel me out in no time. It was mighty good of you to get here so quickly. Thanks. Only, you're not to worry—"

"I'm not worrying," she denied; her voice, after that involuntary cry, firm and businesslike. "But I'm trying to figure something out. Wait."

HE COULD not see her now, for the boulder shut her from his view. But he heard her moving about on the far side of it. Presently she went on, in the same matter-of-fact tone: "I believe I can do it. I'm almost sure I can. There'll be room. I'll be right back."

Again the entrance was darkened by her silhouette against the risen sun. She was gone, the sound of her running feet reaching the imprisoned man more and more faintly.

In a minute she was back again, lugging something in both hands. It was the jack from her car.

"I'm going to pass this through the wider space to you," she told him. "You can use it better from down there than I can. I might send the rock toppling down on you. You can dodge it, if you use the jack yourself. I've looked the stone over. If it is pried up from the left side, where the wider space is, it will either roll down to the bottom or else it will roll against the right-hand wall. It is leaning that way, you'll see. If it rolls down, you can miss it by hug-

ging the wall. If it rolls to the right, that will give you nearly a foot more space to squeeze through. Ready?"

She passed the awkward jack to him through the slot in the rocks. Her manner was as cool as was her pleasant voice; here, in the face of actual peril even as it had been when Cole was at the convict's mercy, months ago. The man gave mute credit to her nerve and breeding.

IT WAS not difficult, guided by the flashlight's rays, to find a fulcrum stone on the rocky floor whereon to brace the jack. Gavin set to work cautiously, testing every step of the ticklish job; prearranging the necessarily lightning-quick move he must make in whichever direction the boulder might sway when he should jack it out of its new emplacement.

Then he began to work the jack's handle. At first he strained without result at the heavy mass. As he threw into it the weight of his body and all his concentrated power, the stone gave way with tricky suddenness.

Out of its dent in the hard floor of the shaft the rock lifted itself an inch or so. Instantly gravitation resumed control over the temporarily fixed mass. Downward and sidewise lurched the huge boulder.

But the side toward which it began to lurch was that against whose wall Gavin Cole had just flattened himself.

The flashlight showed him the initial motion of the upheaved incubus. In another fraction of a second it must have acquired full momentum and have banged against the left-hand wall as it started down the steep shaft. And between it and that wall was Gavin Cole.

As the boulder gave its first slight tremor toward him Cole hurled himself at it with wild-cat fury, bracing his feet on the slimy left-hand wall behind him and smiting the upheaved boulder with the whalebone force of a catapult.

The counter impetus served, if barely it served, to arrest the scarce-begun leftward trend of the mass. There was a second of uncertainty while Gavin strained his every braced muscle to shove the weight away from him.

Then, with a pitch which left the man sprawling on all fours in its wake, the boulder leaped forward as if it were alive. Out and down it bounded. Past the tumbling Gavin it whizzed in its bumpily erratic course to the bottom of the shaft.

There was a resounding splash as it smote the pool of stagnant water. Big drops showered man and girl. A rain of tiny pebbles and a few larger stones

cascaded to the flooring from walls and roof, dislodged by the jar of the boulder's roaring descent.

"Hurry!" gasped Cole, staggering to his feet and catching Faith about the waist. "The whole roof is liable to cave in, now that it's started."

As he spoke he was making for the entrance with all speed, slipping, stumbling, bending double; propelling Faith in front of him and with one arm shielding her head from the increasing downpour of earth and stone and rubble.

It was but a few yards, yet it seemed to Gavin like one of those endless and hopeless races from Horror which one is goaded to in nightmares. Directly behind the fugitives a section of roof fell in, blinding and deafening them with its gusty crash.

Then all at once Gavin and the girl were out through the irregular entrance and on the rock slab beyond.

Above them the sun was shimmering through the green network of forest. Around was the golden peace of the upland morning. From behind belched a swirl of grayish dust.

The shaft echoed and reëchoed to crash after crash, as more and more of roof and sidewalls collapsed under the repeated impacts which had jarred them from their unshored positions.

Heather had frisked out of the cavern ahead of his human companions. Now at sound and sight of the subterranean upheaval he barked lusty defiance at the shaft's mouth until he was forced back, sneezing and choking from the dust clouds that poured forth through the entrance.

Gavin set his teeth to withstand a feeling of active nausea which swept over him as he peered back at the collapsing shaft. Faith, dead-white under her tan, was looking strangely up at him. He forced himself to speak. The supreme occasion called for memorable and eloquent and heartfelt vocal expression. He said impressively:

"I'm afraid we've lost your jack. Too bad!"

Then, for no reason and for every reason, man and maid broke into ungovernable laughter, swaying and panting in hysteric mirth, their peals of cachinnation blending with the muffled crash and slither of falling shaft walls behind them.

Gavin pulled himself up in the very middle of a guffaw. Strangely, the laughter had cleared his nerves of shock and his memory of its crass sense of horror. He was himself again.

"There isn't any way to thank you, Faith," he said, with no emotion at all. "But I think you know I realize just what I owe you. If it hadn't been for you, I'd be the central figure in that cave-in down yonder. You're—you're fine! If—"

"We—we seem to go meandering through life lately taking turns in rescuing each other from movie predicaments," she made answer, wiping the laughter-tears from her eyes. "It's your turn next, Gavin."

Again they began to laugh, as they stood face to face there, disheveled, grimy, smirched. All at once their laughter died. For an instant they stood thus, silent, dazed.

Then, very simply, like two little children, they kissed each other full on the mouth.

NEITHER knew then nor thereafter how it happened. It just had happened; that was all. But the kiss aroused them to its own meaning.

They drew apart, staring at each other as at strangers. Neither of them saw a dust-smeared and grotesquely rumpled vis-à-vis. Each was gazing raptly on a transfigured Olympian. Then Gavin said bewilderedly:

"I love you. You know that, don't you, Faith? I—I love you."

And the girl made answer, as bewilderedly, in banal phrase:

"Yes. I know you do. I know you love me. Because you kissed me."

This most far-fetched of all possible reasons for knowing oneself loved seemed rational to Gavin. Which describes perhaps his mental condition at the moment more vividly than could pages of rhapsody.

Fell another brief silence, shimmer-

ing, golden, unbelievable in its marvel. Then:

"And I love *you*," went on Faith, as if correcting some omission of her own. "You know that, don't you, Gavin? But perhaps you don't. I didn't know it myself till just now. But I do. I—"

The daze passed from Gavin Cole's senses. With a wordless cry he caught her to him.

At last they went back to the car, walking close together, the mystified and forgotten Heather seeking vainly to lure them into a romp with him.

"You're coming home with me, dear," said Faith. "Jeff will be back from the dam for breakfast by the time we get to the house. There are a million things that you and he and I have got to say. I wrote you some of them last night. But they're ever so much best said face to face. We've been in a hideously wretched tangle, all three of us. Half an hour will clear it up. I made Jeff understand that last evening. Even if I didn't care about you, I couldn't let you go on in the way I now know you've been going. You've got to be told, and it's got to be proved to you. Jeff has all the proof of it. The last bit came to him late yesterday. He told me about it. Come."

WILGUS BETT sat at ease and in state in his office at the Eagle Hotel. On the great man's face was a light of complete happiness. A half hour before he had signed the last document and negotiated the final touches on the most profitable deal in his prosperous career.

Bett was very happy; very well content with himself and with all the world. The work, the planning, the million details, the incessant strain of the past few months, were at an end. So was his period of too-frequent sojourn in this hole-in-a-corner mountain townlet and its atrocious hotel. Indeed, many needfully disagreeable and more disagreeably needful things were at an end.

By this time tomorrow the business world in which he moved would be applauding with envious admiration the Napoleonic greatness of Wilgus Bett. He had played a daringly magnificent game, and he had won it.

The latest of several important visitors had been ushered out of the Presence by the cryptic Smeed. For five minutes or so Bett could afford to lean back in his swivel chair, a cigar between his strong white teeth, his eyes fixed in well-earned contentment on the farther wall of his office, and could dream.

In the anteroom, Smeed was clearing out a desk, for master and man were to go back to New York that afternoon. The secretary scarcely looked up from his labors as Gavin Cole came in from the hallway.

"Good morning, Mr. Cole," said Smeed, his parchment voice crackling more aloofly than usual. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to see Bett," answered Gavin shortly as he crossed toward the door of the sacred inner office.

"I am very sorry," returned the secretary, rising and placing himself firmly between Gavin and the portal, "but Mr. Bett cannot see you at present. He left word he is not to be disturbed until—"

The secretary paused, frowning disapproval at the unimpressed visitor. He noted that Cole's face was dust-grimed; that one of his fingers was cut; that he was hatless and that his clothes were smeared with mud.

Most of all he dwelt wonderingly on a queer set look in the engineer's lean face: a look that made Cole seem at once older and less likable.

"Mr. Bett cannot see anyone," Smeed began again, "until—"

His sentence ended in a scandalized squawk.

Gavin, with no effort at all, reached out and gathered in his fist a handful of the breast of Smeed's irreproachably neat waistcoat. Then he flung the horrified secretary across the room.

Smeed collided roughly with the wall and sat down hard. Still squawking, he got to his feet again, just in time to see Gavin open wide the door of the inner office. He saw him enter the desecrated Presence and slam the door behind him.

(To be concluded next week)

The Valley Girl

Bett was on his feet
staring at his lately
despised assistant

Illustrated by
HAROLD
VON SCHMIDT

By ALBERT
PAYSON
TERHUNE

The Story Thus Far:

GAVIN COLE, a young engineer, is working for Wilgus Bett, in what he supposes is a land-development project in the Reginskill Valley in New Jersey. Jeff Christie is working in the same valley—it is his home—for a water company, according to Bett, though Jeff and his sister, Faith, claim that their scheme is also a land-development idea.

A terrific war goes on between the two camps with unauthorized, as far as Cole knows, sabotage being perpetrated by his men.

Finally three of Cole's men make an attempt, against an injunction, to set off some dynamite which will let loose the river, doing untold damage to Christie's work and helping Bett's. Faith tries to hold off the men with Roman candles. The leader is burned.

Gavin discovers what is happening, rushes to the spot and pulls the fuse from the dynamite. Gavin goes back to camp to report this new outrageous sabotage only to be told by Bett's secretary that Bett has left for New York, leaving instructions for him to find the zinc mine supposed to be in the hills. Gavin finds it but is caught in the entrance by a fallen bowlder, is rescued by Faith and her dog. Faith and Gavin realize that they love each other and confess it.

Then Faith takes Gavin home with her, wanting to explain to him the truth about Wilgus Bett and his enterprise.

The next thing we see is Gavin breaking into Bett's office.

WILGUS BETT turned at the unceremonious opening of his office door. Not thus did the impeccable Smeed enter the presence of his master. Some pest was relying on the blanket permission to come at all times into the office on any matter of importance. Well, thank the Lord, all that rot was over now. No further need to be breezily approachable to all his chuckle-headed staff. Indeed, there would be no further need for the services of that staff.

Still—and here Bett's brow darkened ever so little—he had bidden Smeed to keep the riffraff out this morning. For the first time in his several years of service the perfect secretary was forgetting to be flawless. A word of withering rebuke was indicated when next Smeed should appear.

All this in the space of Bett's leisurely twisting of his swivel chair to confront the intruder.

THEN he saw the sacrilegious trespasser was Gavin Cole. At the sight, Bett's wonted suavity came back to the momentarily ruffled brow. He had planned to be out and away by the time Cole should return from the wild-goose chase on Durkin Hill, and he had planned that the inevitable and richly anticipated last interview with Gavin should occur later in Bett's own New York office.

The giant was looking forward to that interview. Even so in boyhood he had looked forward to the first sunshiny day of spring in order that he might press live ants gently against the sticky gum of a pine tree and then turn the burning-glass of his watch on them. (There had been another game too along the same lines, but even merrier: with kittens instead of mere ants.)

Bett was anticipating keenly the moment when he should vivisect and eviscerate his dupe, Cole. Indeed, with his acute sense of humor, he had been licking his chops over that prospect since

the hour when the jobless and prospectless booby was hired for this Reginskill job.

But Wilgus Bett's humor was epicurean as well as avid. He had not wanted to take the feather edge off the interview by holding it here and now. Moreover, the fool might break into print. Safe as the consummation of his own deal seemed, there was no use in running the faintest risk of impairing any angle of it by possible premature newspaper protest.

When the last petty detail should have been cleared up in the New York office a day hence it would be safe to let Gavin blab and complain verbally or in print to his heart's content. The louder Cole might squeal then, the louder would be the laugh on him.

Thus Bett spoke more sharply than was his custom as Gavin stamped so unceremoniously into the sanctum.

"Where is Smeed?" he demanded. "I told him I wasn't to be disturbed. I—"

"Smeed," replied Cole calmly, "is on his back in a corner of the anteroom. At least that's where he was when I saw him last. And he told me you weren't to be disturbed."

"Then why in h—" began Bett.

He paused to note his subordinate's actions.

Gavin had shut the door behind him. Then he had locked it and taken out the key. Now he crossed to the other door of the office and turned the key in its lock. Next he went over to the open

window, tossed both keys out into the deserted alleyway below and closed the window.

Bett got to his feet, puzzled, angry. "Sit down," Cole adjured him, adding: "Or keep on standing if you'd rather. I shut us in so we could have a quiet little chat. I have been finding out some things today, Mr. Bett—things you and I must talk over."

Bett's annoyance gave way to a half smile. So the blockhead had heard something of the campaign's climax? Well, anyone was at liberty to know it now. It would be in all of the morrow's papers. Since the interview could not be postponed to the time and place Bett's gourmet fancy had ordained, it might as well come now and as much relish as possible be extracted from it. After all, its main features could be dwelt on as satisfactorily here as in New York. Bett thrilled with pleasant foretaste.

THERE was a discreet but vehement rapping on the office main door. The secretary had recovered sufficiently in mind and in nerve to seek the meaning of the rasp of key in lock.

"It's all right, Smeed," called Bett jovially. "It's all right. Let us alone."

He settled himself back in his chair, with the mien of one who prepares to enjoy a jolly play. He picked up the cigar he had laid down and stuck it back between his teeth, puffing it to a brighter glow. (Continued on page 45)

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"Now, then," he vouchsafed, with much cordiality, "fire away, boy. What's on your chest?"

Gavin Cole seated himself on a corner of the desk. His face was set and emotionless. There was a restrained quality to his voice, when presently he spoke, which gave it an uncertain note suggesting timidity.

"Bett," he asked, "is it true that Jeff Christie has been working for the honest development of this valley along the lines his sister told me last spring? Has he been working for the valley and for its preservation and betterment and not really as a secret agent for the Seaboard City Water Company? Has he?"

"To the best of my belief," answered Bett, "he has. The simp really has put his own fortune and his friends' fortunes into a wild-cat scheme to make this valley rich and populous, and all that kind of thing. And that's all the good it's done him. I don't mind saying," he added judiciously, "that it was a good scheme and it had plenty of promise in it. Only he happened to run counter to me. I needed this valley, and I had to smash Christie. It's a way I have with people who get under my feet."

He spoke almost urbanely and smiled in friendly amusement up at the listening Gavin.

"Why did you tell me that string of lies last spring? Why did you say he had sold himself to the Seaboard City Water Company?"

"Why does a jockey touch his mount with the spurs?" countered Bett, wholly unabashed and without a shadow of offense. "Why does he rowl his mount when he gets to a ticklish point in a race? He does it to make the horse throw every atom of his power into winning. A lie isn't a pretty spur. But many's the close race it's won for me. This one, for instance. Get the idea?"

"Yes," assented Gavin, after a moment's pause, "I get it."

HIS tone was mild, almost conciliatory. Bett despised him afresh for a cheap-souled wage slave. The giant went on:

"If we hadn't balked him at every step, Christie would have got to be too big a stumbling block for us to climb over. So I had to—"

"Bett," interposed Gavin, breaking in apologetically on the homily, "is it true that you wanted to grab this valley and get your dam started and buy up options, not for any land development scheme such as you pretended to me, but so the Seaboard City Water Company could be cajoled into buying the whole thing from your syndicate at a big profit?"

"At a gratifyingly big profit," amended Bett. "But until this week I was afraid we might have to go on with the absurd bluffing work for another two or three months before I could land them. Without boring you with details, I hit on a lucky way of scaring them by coquetting coyly with the Four-State water crowd. So the Seaboard people came a-running. Yesterday they came. This morning the final contracts were signed. It was all done at top speed. Tomorrow they take over the work here. Why, boy," he continued, pityingly, "didn't you even guess when I ordered such a whopping foundation for such a piker dam? But, then, you wouldn't guess. You never do. That is one reason you've been so useful to me. Give me a zealous fool, I always say, for a ticklish job."

He smiled up at Gavin, as though he had just paid the engineer a graceful compliment. Gradually Bett was beginning to warm to the interview. It promised much along his own characteristic cat-and-mouse lines.

But as he watched Gavin the giant's face lost a bit of its happy anticipation. According to Bett's own forecast of the scene, this was the point at which Cole should break forth in amusingly gratifying curses and reproaches. Instead, Gavin was meeting his gaze

unmoved, save for that strangely set expression of eye and mouth.

There was scant joyance in applying the burning glass when the prisoned ant would not do its own share of the performance by squirming wildly under the torture ray. Bett turned the glass for a stronger exposure to the sun.

"Yes," he expounded, "this is the best site for a reservoir in all New Jersey. Almost the best on the Atlantic seaboard. I've had my eye on it a long time, but things never seemed to shape themselves rightly for it till this year. You were an ideal man for the preliminary work and for the whole job—you with your rabid hate for the water crowd. I was lucky to get you."

AGAIN he sat back, watching for the squirm of the ant. But the ant did not squirm.

"Yes," purred Bett. "It's been a sweet job from the start. And now my work is bought in by the Seaboard outfit at my own terms. I owe a lot to you, boy."

"You do," agreed Gavin, "and you're going to pay it all."

"Is that a threat?" asked Bett, highly entertained.

"No," corrected Gavin. "A promise. A very solemn promise. Not to be redeemed *some* day, but now and here. In the first place, you've made a few serious mistakes, Bett, just as every crook does. For instance, you bought too little land outright, and you relied too much on options."

"Quite so," assented Bett, speaking as if of a child, "and partly on your advice. In that your advice was sound. The Seaboard people have complimented me on the reasonable prices they'll be able to get the land for. You sure drove good bargains—except for yourself."

"Yes," said Gavin, mildly, "I did. By the way, that line of sabotage and Gerritt's stunt yesterday—they were all done under your orders, of course?"

"Naturally. Anyone but a silly idealist with his head in the clouds would have guessed that from the start. Christie had to be crippled. I knew you would kick, and I still needed you. I don't need you any more. That's why I can indulge the gorgeous luxury of being frank. No man on earth loves to be frank more than I do. And"—he sighed plaintively—"no man on earth gets less chance to be. . . . If I had got word an hour earlier that the Seaboard people had surrendered, I'd have saved myself the bother and expense of Ham Gerritt's little excursion yesterday. But it's worth risking an extra penny to get a ten-spot, isn't it? No, I don't grudge paying whatever Gerritt's smash-up will cost me. Besides, the story of that girl holding them up with a bunch of fizzers is worth the expense. She—"

"Aren't we straying from the point?" asked Gavin, with labored civility. "We were speaking of options, I think. I—"

"No," denied Bett, "it was you who brought up the dry topic of options, as a sort of non sequitur after saying you were going to get back at me. I didn't catch the drift, but—"

"I said I was going to get back at you," admitted Gavin, "but when I spoke of your fat sheaf of land options I was leading up tactfully to a statement that I had already got back at you in part. The options are in your safe still, I suppose? Well, why not take a look at them? If—"

"I've been over them all, thanks," said Bett. "In fact, you may remember, I had them drawn up especially by my law men, and I brought them out here to you last spring, the day I sicked you on to Jeff Christie. So—"

"The same day," continued Cole, in slow-spoken explanation—"the same day someone gave me a rather low estimate of your squareness. That person had nothing to go on except intuition. I laughed at the idea that you weren't on the level in this development scheme of yours. But in the back of my mind I

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was pestered. I couldn't shake free of what I had just heard. So at last I hit on a way of compromising between sanity and intuition.

"I took the option forms down to the Regin job printer," resumed Gavin. "They were in a simple type. I had no bother in getting them reprinted to look precisely as they had looked before—unless one happened to wade through the maze of small-print clauses at the bottom."

"Huh?" ejaculated Bett, sitting up. "What's—"

"I had them insert about a dozen words, down in that small-type jumble," explained Cole. "You'd never notice it unless you read the option forms clear through. And of course you never troubled yourself to read them through after you turned them over to me that day up at my shack last spring. If you had—"

Bett was on his feet, staring at his lately despised assistant as at a rabbit which suddenly should display a gift for discoursing in iambic pentameter.

"If you had troubled to read them over again," pursued Gavin, "you would have found my inserted clause—which says that if it is found the land is to be used for water-supply purposes the option shall become void. If you were on the square, no harm would be done and I should be out of pocket for the printing bill. But if by any off chance you

you a fortune—or has promised to pay it—for useless farmlands that it can't flood. Oh, I forgot—Christie is having his lawyers send over to the Seaboard offices to notify them about the catch. Something tells me the deal is going to fall apart with a loud bang and that the Napoleonic Mr. Wilgus Bett is going to be left to hold a rather costly bag. I understand that no actual payments except the binders have been made to your syndicate yet by the Seaboard. Something tells me none ever will be. So much for that part of the case. Now we'll come to my own private account with the man who has cheated me and tried to turn me into a crook. That isn't on the free list. It—"

BETT had not heard nor heeded the calmly worded statement of the appalling new angle to the situation. With shaking fingers he had drawn out a bundle of printed and signed and witnessed forms and was running his eye over the topmost of them.

His mouth flew ajar, emitting uncanny static sounds which clouded the diction of his really brilliant volley of profanity.

"You've found it, eh?" queried Gavin through the gush of expletive. "Yes, so I see. And you realize what it means? You told me once that more wise men had come to grief from underestimating the brains of a so-called fool than in any other way. Very good. So much for that. Now for our own party, yours and mine."

As he spoke he dropped his coat to the floor and stepped up to Wilgus Bett. The giant's face was purple. The old scar on his chin stood out like smeared ebony. The tangles of temple

had wrecked his work and his fortune and his prestige—the erstwhile booby he had promised himself the æsthetic pleasure of torturing.

The giant was stripped of his suave veneer and of all other shrewdly acquired mental and moral trappings. Insane fury obsessed him: a maniac craving to kill and tear asunder this long-sneered-at annihilator of his golden plans.

At Gavin he threw himself, blindly savage in his bloodlust. Men in such a mood are easy prey to a skilled boxer who can keep his head. With entire lack of effort Cole sidestepped the bull rush.

Then as the giant hurtled past him Gavin's left fist was driven with dynamic force and precision to Bett's jaw, while his right thudded in a vicious half hook to his adversary's heart.

A normal man must have been knocked senseless by the jaw punch. A normal man's whole system would have been jarred to nausea and faintness by the terrific hook to the heart. The only outward effect of both blows was to stop Bett's momentum and send him staggering back a step or so.

Then, almost before he had ceased to move backward, he was plunging afresh at his shorter and lighter opponent.

The two punches had had also the effect of jarring the giant out of his unseeing mania of rage and steadying his hot brain to a semblance of human reasoning. No longer a mere wild animal relying rashly on his brute force to batter down his victim, he fell back on the science and the strength concentration which were his by birthright and by constant athletic training.

Tenfold more dangerous because his brain was awake, he ran in again at Cole. But this was no aimless rush. It was guided and propelled by the trained powers which would have carried their owner to the top of the heavy-weight division had he sought the ring as an outlet for his prowess.

were't playing fair—"

Wilgus Bett had stood swaying drunkenly, his strong face a queerly sodden mask while Cole outlined what he had done. Now

his giant body galvanized to action and his face was the face of a fighter.

In one stride he had reached the safe in the corner and was spinning away at the knobs.

"Quite right," approved Gavin. "Verify it, by all means. I told Jeff Christie this morning about that water clause in all the options. I left him phoning his New York lawyers about it. Before I came in here to see you just now I went up to my room and got some of the unused option blanks and sent them across to Christie by messenger. He has them by this time. In half an hour—"

Bett did not hear the carefully modulated flow of explanation. Frenziedly he was yanking wide the safe door with one hand, while with the other he was groping for a compartment far at the back.

"You see, Bett," went on Gavin, "every option was signed with that clause in it. By tonight everyone within ten miles will know you have sold your supposed development holdings here to the Seaboard City Water Company, and that the Seaboard is planning to flood the valley. That means every option giver will cancel."

"Every important key site, except one or two, is covered only by options. That means the Seaboard Company has paid

Their good friend Heather watched them disappear

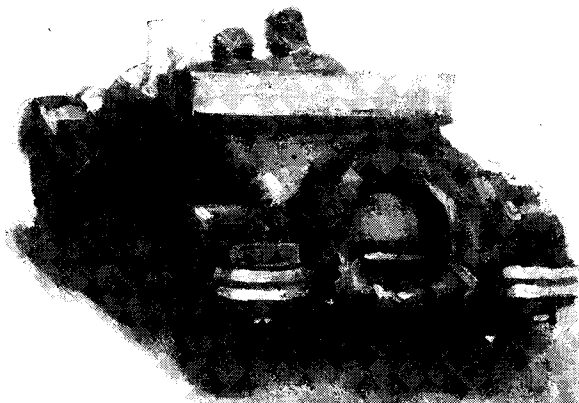
veins were coiled snakes. His eyes lost their look of blank horror and began to blaze.

"Good!" exclaimed Gavin. "You're sane again. I told you it wasn't on the free list to use a white man as a dupe. You owe me a bill. I am here to collect it in the only way such a filthy bill can be squared."

He spoke evenly, almost casually. As he finished his left arm shot out, and his loose-held fingers flicked Bett bruisingly athwart the distorted mouth.

"Put up your hands, you oversized skunk!" Gavin commanded.

With a wild-beast howl, Wilgus Bett came to life. Roaring, he flung himself at the man who



Well had Cole known what he might be incurring in challenging such a man to a finish fight. Tales of Bett's fearsome exploits against recalcitrant gang foremen and the like were common talk in engineering circles.

Yet in no other way did Cole feel he could regain his self-respect and punish fitly the man whose loyal dupe he had been. As rabidly ferocious for the fray as was the giant himself, Gavin nevertheless threw himself supercautiously on the defensive.

He sought to sidestep the charge, hoping for another chance to counter as effectively as before. But Bett would not blunder twice into the same trap. In mid-rush the giant halted, feinted with a menacing right, then drove his left with piston speed and force, for the wind.

IT WAS a simple trick to block. Cole blocked it, still seeking to counter. In the same second he was reeling back, dizzily and off balance, from a right hook to the jaw, for which Bett's seemingly clumsy maneuver had opened the way.

By rare luck or instinct Gavin had thrust upward his left shoulder as the hook flashed in. The shoulder was numbed for a moment by the force of the impact and enough of the blow landed on the side of the jaw to pave the way for a knockout.

As Gavin staggered backward the giant was after him, avidly seeking to finish what he had begun. Still dizzy and half numb, Cole managed to block the fusillade of smashes enough to duck forward into a clinch.

Bett threw him off as easily as Gavin had slung the secretary across the ante-room—threw him off and swirled in at him again.

Cole gave ground before the hurricane, dancing away, while Bett drove him back the length of the room with a volley of short-arm blows. Most of these the smaller man ducked or blocked or backed away from, striving ever to land a counter on the bulky giant.

Cole ran deftly into a clinch, taking a thudding blow on the cheek in the process of getting inside that terrific battery of punches. This time Bett did not toss him away, but closed his mighty arms about the lighter man in the dreaded underhold before ever Gavin could guess his intent or secure his own grip.

From the floor Cole's feet were swung. The python grasp of Bett's locked arms was about his waist, tightening and tightening. Bett's chin was thrust into the hollow of Gavin's shoulder, pressing Cole's upper body sharply back, even while the arms drew his waist forward.

From such a grip, rightly applied by a man of great strength, there is seldom an escape before ribs and spine are snapped by the fearful cross pressure. Cole's eyes misted. He could not breathe. His wildest struggles could not ease the ever-constricting pressure about his middle or the resistless outthrust of Bett's chin in the shoulder-blade hollow.

Then all at once Bett felt his victim's taut muscles slacken and his tensely struggling body go limp. Inert, moveless, Gavin sagged heavy in his foe's savage grasp. Bett loosed somewhat the constriction of his clasp on the slumped body. Floorward slipped Cole's feet, that had been helplessly high in air.

Then Bett renewed convulsively his death grasp. But he was an instant too slow in noting the sudden tensing of Cole's flaccid body. Once more he was too late in estimating aright the intelligence of a despised adversary.

As Gavin's feet touched ground, he abandoned his rôle of helplessly swooning victim. He abandoned it in one savagely swift maneuver taught him years ago by a renowned rough-and-tumble street fighter.

His first move, on finding his footing, was to drive his heel, with all his strength and weight, down on the nearest instep of his conqueror.

Perhaps there are mortals who can withstand the first involuntary anguish which sweeps through the body as the cluster of sensitive instep nerves is stamped on. But, with all his superman prowess, Bett was not such a mortal.

Instinctively he loosened his newly constricting grasp on Gavin and writhed in torment as the hot stings of pain danced from his bruised instep throughout his entire gigantic body. Only for a fraction of a moment did the giant yield to this luxury of pain. Then, doubly savage for his injury and for Gavin's successful ruse, Bett was his all-conquering self again, a terrible fighting machine.

But in that tiny flicker of time Gavin Cole had torn free of the encircling arms and had driven a rage-impelled right fist in an uppercut to Bett's jaw-point. Wilgus, in the act of lunging forward at his slippery foe, caught the tremendous blow on his chin with all its undiminished impetus.

Back he staggered, and after him flew Gavin Cole, attacking in whirlwind fashion, boring in and delivering punch after punch to face and to body. It was a bloodthirsty rally, and it wrought cruel punishment. Before Wilgus could recover himself he was lurching backward, his giant form the thudded punching bag for a half score of viciously punishing blows.

To Cole, in the fiery exultation of his own onslaught, it seemed that no human endurance could withstand such punishment as he was inflicting on the reeling giant. Every hammering punch he drove into Bett's anatomy helped to ease his own resentment against the man who had fooled him so cruelly and so long and who had beguiled him into working for the very water interests Cole abhorred.

But Bett no longer was retreating beneath the sheer torrent of Gavin's assault. He rallied with a jerk of the body and an impatient shake of his leonine head, as if dismissing the mortal handicaps which had made him retire in face of a lesser man's attack.

So suddenly that Cole was all but caught off guard, Wilgus snatched the aggressive from him and was sweeping back to the conflict with strength seemingly unimpaired. It was a rally as dazzlingly brilliant as it was unforeseen by Gavin.

Back moved Cole, the giant pressing him hard, raining blows at him, seeking once more to corner Gavin or force him to grips. In face of that charge, Cole gave ground, moving lithely, warily avoiding the crafty or brutal attempts to wedge him into a corner or draw him into a clinch.

As he retreated he landed counter after counter to Bett's ferocious offensive. To Gavin, for the first time in the short course of the battle, came a ray of genuine hope. He realized he was fending off Bett's frantic fusillade with less difficulty than at first and that he was whipping more and more effective counters of his own past his antagonist's guard.

Yes, assuredly, Bett's incredible burst of speed was slowing down. Redoubling his own caution, Gavin smiled grimly to himself as he fought his shiftily defensive fight. He knew he had hit upon the right tack, on the one possibility of winning.

Bett was four inches taller and forty pounds heavier than he, but while he still was an opponent no normal man would care to encounter, days of ease and of overfeeding had begun to mar his glorious physique for any long-sustained effort.

HE WAS slowing down, if very gradually, and he knew it as well as did Gavin. If the fight were to be won by him, it must be won quickly.

Bett's face was asmeared with blood and was cruelly bruised and swollen. One of his eyes had begun to close under the crash of Gavin's fist in that brief retreat from which the giant had rallied so supremely. He was not a pleasing sight.

Gavin continued to hold the defensive and to force the other to do the bulk of the work. He was well content to play this waiting game, wearing down the giant, and meantime inflicting as much punishment as he could while he backed away. A little longer—

The outer door of the office resounded from a thunderous hammering. Smeed must have heard the ungodly din of
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strife and have sent for reinforcements.

The stout door panels held even while they sagged and cracked. The old-fashioned lock was defying kicks and shoulder shoves.

Then on the other door came a fanfare of pounding and rattling. The hotel people evidently were trying to get in from both sides. In the alley below running steps sounded. Somebody bawled for a ladder.

No, Gavin was not to have time to carry out his game of wearing down his foe. Presently, through door or window, interruption must come. Cole ceased to retreat, standing foot to foot with his towering opponent and slugging murderously at short range.

He received blows which would have crushed him had they been struck earlier in the fray when Bett had had all his old giant's vigor. As it was, they shook and jarred Gavin and sent him staggering. But ever he came back for more, hammering with all his furious strength and science, landing three punches to each one he took.

Up and down the wide office raged the fight. Chairs were knocked over and trodden underfoot. The warriors caromed against the heavy desk. Over it went resoundingly with its weight of papers and furnishings. The rug was snarled into a heap. Under stamping feet, one upset chair was turned to matchwood.

THE doors bulged and groaned. Their panels splintered from the frantic efforts of those outside to gain ingress. A ladder top bumped against the sill of one of the windows. The room was a haze of choking dust.

Cole's toe caught in the rung of a fallen chair. He jumped back to regain his balance. His right foot landed in the middle of the snarled rug. The rug slid from under him. Down he crashed on his back amid the wrecked furniture.

With a growl, Wilgus Bett was upon him, making oddly gruesome sounds far down in his thick throat, like a beast worrying its prey. The giant's hands were at Gavin's jugular vein as Cole lay there, prostrate and dazed.

The exploringly gripping fingers closed about his throat, shutting off his breath, and digging to the carotid artery. Bett's hideously disfigured face glared into Cole's with insane glee, as he had the lesser man at last wholly at his mercy. Bett's body bent eagerly forward as the giant sought to kneel on the vanquished fighter's chest, the better to enforce his strangling grasp on the throat.

Had he been calmer, less completely in the power of the murder lust that possessed him, he would not have attempted so daring a move as this against a man who had shown himself a master of rough-and-tumble fighting. But the feel of his own fingers in the hated throat of the fallen Cole swept away every impulse from the giant's mind save only homicide.

As the fingers caught Cole's throat and as the huge body swooped down toward him, Gavin went into instinctive action. Doubling his legs under him, turning himself into a human catapult, he braced his back against the floor and his head against the wainscoting. At the same time—it was all the work of a quarter second—he seized Bett by both wrists and brought his own feet upward to the pit of the giant's stomach.

With every atom of muscle and leverage at his command, Gavin drove his bunched legs upward and jerked down Bett's prisoned wrists. Then, in almost the same move, he shifted his wrist hold to the down-plunging shoulders and thrust them outward and to one side.

The first of the Regis policemen swarmed up the ladder and peered into the dust-murked office. He had a fleeting glimpse of Wilgus Bett bending down over a man who lay on his back with legs drawn high up under him and with hands that grabbed at his conqueror's wrists.

Before the policeman's astonished mind could do more than record this sight he beheld the gigantic Bett soar upward and sharply to one side, the huge body doubling like a jackknife as it shot aloft.

For several feet it flew in air, up and sidewise. Then down it crashed headforemost, smiting the sharp wainscot edge with a resounding crash.

Gavin Cole scrambled panting from the floor and stood swaying drunkenly above his moveless enemy.

The two office doors burst in simultaneously, while the policeman was wriggling through the window he had opened and while other men were scampering up the ladder. All at once the room was full of noisy people, shouting, gesticulating, blithering idiotic questions.

Closely they crowded about the space in whose center sprawled the mammoth body of Wilgus Bett. Above the stunned giant Gavin Cole still was swaying and weaving and panting. All around was chaos of disorder and destruction.

Both men were in indescribably hideous plight. They were all but naked from the waist up. Their sinewy bodies were blotched and bruised in harlequin pattern. Through the worst bruises oozed pin points of blood. Their faces were masks of blood and were grotesquely distorted by lump and abrasion.

Indeed Wilgus Bett was almost unrecognizable. His face had been the goal of thrice as many blows as had landed on Gavin's. Many a long day must pass before it could resume any of its cameo outlines or before the life mask of breezy suavity could sit convincingly upon it once more.

The giant had had the amazing physical endurance to remain upright under Gavin's punishing hailstorm of bare-knuckle punches. But his ease-softened flesh had not had a like power of resistance.

He was a revoltingly nauseous sight as he spraddled there. Slowly returning consciousness caused his giant body to quiver and twitch. One eye sought flutteringly to open beneath a mass of swollen flesh. The other eye was quite invisible. As men bent to lift him his left arm dangled limply. The shoulder blade had snapped at the concussion against the wainscot. The shoulder itself was thrown out of joint.

Gavin Cole fought for breath and to steady the spinning motion of the room. Through his dizziness he could see Smeed kneeling beside his fallen lord. Then he could hear, through the roaring and buzzing in his head, the secretary's dry voice vehemently commanding one of the policemen to arrest Bett's conqueror.

ONE of the detective agency guards approached Gavin uncertainly. The need for action helped to clear Cole's tortured brain. He waved the khaki-clad policeman back.

"I'm in command here, in Mr. Bett's absence," he croaked pantingly. "Mr. Bett is absent now. All but his body—I've smashed that. As I've smashed his fortune and the crooked game he played! I'm in charge here. You'll take your orders from me as usual. Understand?"

He wondered at his own comparative coherence of speech. Emboldened by it, he turned to the dryly fuming secretary.

"If Mr. Bett wants me arrested when he comes to himself," said Cole, finding it increasingly easy to frame intelligent words and to pin the revolving room down to one temporary position, "he'll know where to look for me. But I think he won't. I know too much. Besides, our account is squared. Squared for keeps. Best pick up that litter of option blanks over there. They'll be handy for—pipe lighters."

He spoke drunkenly, but ever with more ease.

"Now, then," he went on to all and sundry, "I'm going to clean up. I've still got one good punch left—for the

chap who tries to stop me. Give me room."

Bleeding, horrible, a thing to strike terror, he stumbled toward the shattered office door. His clothes fell from him in blood-flecked tatters. The crowd made way for him, shrinking back from his lurching approach and from his blinkingly threatening glare.

A HALF hour later, as Gavin finished the painful process of bathing and of getting into clean clothes, there was a rap at his room door.

"Come in!" he ordered truculently.

Jeff Christie entered, hurrying over to him and laying both hands on Cole's shoulders.

"I didn't hear about it till a few minutes ago," said Jeff. "One of my men was in town. He joined the bunch that burst in and saw the wind-up of the fight. He phoned me. I came here in a rush. I'm sorry I'm late. Lord, man, you've sure been through the mill this day! You didn't tell me you were going to beat him up. You only said you had to settle accounts with him. So—"

"How else could they have been settled?" demanded Gavin. "What else was there to do?"

"There's a lot else to do now, anyway," answered Christie. "And you're not in shape to do any of it. On the way upstairs they told me Bett has come to his senses. He's been put to bed. The doctor's there. I'm going to stand by in case Bett is fool enough to try to make trouble for you. I can stop it in three words. But you're in no shape to. Chase along."

"But," asked Gavin, "where am I to go? Besides, I've got my packing to—"

"You're going to my house, where you belong, and that's where you're going to stay. Faith is waiting in the car for you. Drive on with her. I'll pack your things. You're not fit to. You ought to be in bed if you don't want to come down with a sickness. Hurry along home. She won't mind how you look. Go ahead."

At the foot of the stairs Gavin encountered the impeccable Smeed, just coming out of his stricken employer's room. Gavin stopped him.

"If Bett decides to carry this thing any further," said Cole, "tell him he'll find me at Mr. Christie's. Tell him I am working for Mr. Christie now. I've been employed by him, man and boy, as his chief engineer, for pretty nearly two hours. And I'm putting my savings into an interest in his venture. Don't forget to tell Bett. I'm sorry I can't send friend Wilgus some snappy message that would be a neat climax to our happy time together. But I'm too tired to think of one. Good-by."

Disregarding the secretary's glare of ostentatious loathing, Cole passed on to the street. In the runabout before the hotel sat Faith Christie. At sight of Gavin's battered face she forced back an exclamation of motherlike unhappiness. She hailed him blithely as he climbed with stiff awkwardness into the car. They started off, for the first time ignoring their good friend Heather, who watched them till they disappeared.

"Jeff is ever so tactful," Faith said. "He said I'm to drive you home, and he'll come along later. I—I wonder if he guesses about our being engaged."

Then, in a worried longing for reassurance, she asked:

"I—I suppose we are engaged, aren't we?"

"I suppose we are," he made answer with much solemnity, after a second of badly acted pondering. "Yes, really I suppose we are. I hope so, anyhow. Don't you?"

"Yes," she replied without even his pretense of stopping to consider the all-important question. "Yes, I do hope so. Honestly I do, Gavin. When we get clear out of town—oh, a mile or so into the country—do you suppose it will hurt your poor battered-up mouth very much to get kissed again?"

THE END